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The Missionary Sheriff
A Book of True Lovers, etc

With Illustrations by

E. M. ASHE

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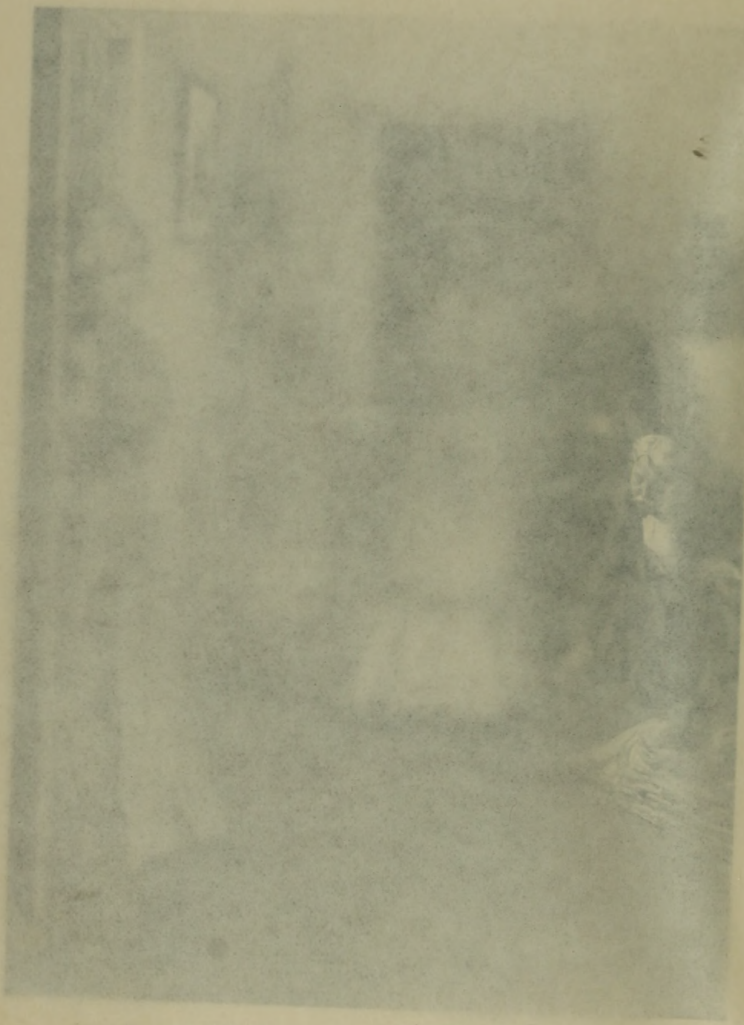

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Serene, indifferent to fate,
Thou sittest by the Western gate,
Thou seest the white seas fold their tents,
Oh, warder of two continents.
Thou drawest all things small and great
To thee beside the Western gate.

THE LION'S SHARE

CHAPTER I

THE MAN WITH THE MOLES

The first time that Colonel Rupert Winter saw Cary Mercer was under circumstances calculated to fix the incident firmly in his memory. In the year 1903, home from the Philippines on furlough, and preparing to return to a task big enough to attract him in spite of its exile and hardships, he had visited the son of a friend at Harvard. They were walking through the corridors of one of the private dormitories where the boy roomed. Rather grimly the soldier's eyes were noting marble wainscoting and tiled floors, and contrasting this academic environment with his own at West Point. A caustic comment rose to his lips, but it was not uttered, for he heard the sharp bark of a pistol, followed by a thud, and a crackle as of breaking glass.

"Do you fellows amuse yourselves shooting up

the dormitory?" said he. The boy halted; he had gone white.

"It came from Mercer's room!" he cried, and ran across the corridor to a door with the usual labeling of two visiting cards. The door was not locked. Entering, they passed into a vestibule, thence through another door which stood open. For many a day after the colonel could see just how the slender young figure looked, the shoulders in a huddle on the study table, one arm swinging nerveless; beside him, on the floor, a revolver and a broken glass bottle. The latter must have made the crackling sound. Some dark red liquid, soaking the open sheets of a newspaper, filled the room with the pungent odor of alcohol. Only the top of the lad's head showed—a curly, silky, dark brown head; but even before the colonel lifted it he had seen a few thick drops matting the brown curls. He laid the head back gently and his hand slipped to the boy's wrist.

"No use, Ralph," he said in the subdued tones that the voice takes unconsciously in the presence of death.

"And Endy was going to help him," almost sobbed Ralph. "He told me he would. Oh, *why* couldn't he have trusted his friends!"

The colonel was looking at the newspaper—"Was it money?" said he; for a glance at the dabbled sheet had brought him the headings of the stock quotations: "Another Sharp Break in Stocks. New Low Records." It *had* been money. Later, after what needed to be done was over, after doctors and officers of the law were gone, Colonel Winter heard the wretched story. A young, reckless, fatally attractive Southerner, rich friends, college societies, joyous times; nothing really wicked or vicious, only a surrender to youth and friendship and pleasure, and then the day of reckoning—duns, college warnings, the menace of black disgrace. The young fellow was an orphan, with no near kindred save one brother much older than he. The brother was reputed to be rich, according to Southern standards, and young Mercer, who had just come into a modest patrimony of his own, invested in his brother's ventures. As to the character of these ventures, whether flimsy or substantial, the colonel's informants were absolutely ignorant. All they knew of the elder Mercer was that he was often in New York and had "a lot to do with Wall Street." He wasn't a broker; no, he was trying to raise money to hang on to some big properties that he had;

and the stocks seemed to be going at remarkable rates just now, the bottom dropping out of the market. If a certain stock of the Mercers'—they didn't know the name—could be kept above twenty-seven he would pull through. Colonel Winter made no comment, but he remembered that when he had studied the morning's stock-market pages for himself, he had noted "bad slump in the Southern steels," and "Tidewater on the toboggan slide; off three to four points, declining from twenty-seven and a fraction to twenty-three."

"Another victim of the Wall Street pirates," was the colonel's silent judgment on the tragedy. "Lucky for her his mother's dead."

The next morning he had returned and had gone to his young friend's rooms.

The boy was still full of the horror of the day before. Mercer's brother was in Cambridge, he said—arrived that morning from New York. "Endy is going to fetch him round to get him out of the reporters' way sometime this evening; maybe there's something I can do"—this in explanation of his declining to dine with the colonel. As the two entered the rooms, Winter was a little in advance, and caught the first glimpse of a man

sitting in a big mission arm-chair, his head sunk on his breast. So absorbed was this man in his own distempered musings that the new-comers' approach did not arouse him. He sat with knitted brows and clenched hands, staring into vacancy; his rigid and pallid features set in a ghastly intensity of thought. There was suffering in the look; but there was more: the colonel, who had been living among the serpent passions of the Orient, knew deadly anger when he saw it; it was branded on the face before him. Involuntarily he fell back; he felt as if he had blundered in on a naked soul. Noiselessly he slipped out of the range of vision. He spoke loudly, halting to ask some question about the rooms; this made a moment's pause.

It was sufficient; in the study they found a quiet, calm, although rather haggard-looking man, who greeted Winter's companion courteously, with a Southern accent, and a very good manner. He was presented to the colonel as Mr. Mercer. He would have excused himself, professing that he was just going, but the colonel took the words out of his mouth: "Ralph, here, has a cigar for me—that is all I came for; see you at the Touraine, Ralph, to-morrow for luncheon, then." He

did not see the man again; neither did he see Ralph, although he made good, so far as in him lay, his fiction of an engagement at the Touraine. But Ralph could not come; and Winter had lunched, instead, with an old friend at his club, and had watched, through a stately Georgian window, the shifting greenery of the Common in an east wind.

All through the luncheon the soldier's mind kept swerving from the talk in hand to Cary Mercer's face. Yet he never expected to see it again. Three years later he did see it; and this second encounter, of which, by the way, Mercer was unconscious, was the beginning of an absorbing chapter in his life. A short space of time that chapter occupied; yet into it crowded mystery, peril, a wonderful and awful spectacle, the keenest happiness and the cruelest anxiety. Let his days be ever so many, the series of events which followed Mercer's reappearance will not be blurred by succeeding experiences; their vivid and haunting pictures will burn through commoner and later happenings as an electric torch flares through layers of mist.

Nothing, however, could promise adventure less than the dull and chilly late March evening

when the chapter began. Nor could any one be less on the lookout for adventure, or even interest, than was Rupert Winter. In truth, he was listless and depressed.

When he alighted from his cab in the great court of the Rock Island Station he found Haley, his old orderly, with a hand on the door-hasp. Haley's military stoicism of demeanor could not quite conceal a certain agitation—at least not from the colonel's shrewd eye, used to catch the moods of his soldiers. He strangled a kind of sigh. "Doesn't like it much more than I," thought Rupert Winter. "This is mighty kind of you, Haley," he said.

"Yes, sor," answered Haley, saluting. The colonel grinned feebly. Haley, busy repelling a youthful porter, did not notice the grin; he strode ahead with the colonel's world-scarred hand-luggage, found an empty settee beside one of the square-tiled columns of the waiting-room and disposed his burden on the iron-railed seat next the corner one, which he reserved for the colonel.

"The train ain't in yet, Colonel," said he. "I'll be telling you—"

"No, Haley," interrupted the colonel, whose lip twitched a little; and he looked aside; "best say

good-by now; don't wait. The fact is, I'm thinking of too many things you and I have gone through together." He held out his hand; Haley, with a stony expression, gazed past it and saluted, while he repeated: "Yes, sor; I'll be back to take the bags whin the train's made up." Whereupon he wheeled and made off with speed.

"Just the same damned obstinate way he's always had," chuckled the colonel to himself. Nevertheless, something ached in his throat as he frowned and winked.

"Oh, get a brace on you, you played-out old sport!" he muttered. "The game's on the last four cards and you haven't established your suit; you'll have to sit back and watch the other fellows play!" But his dreary thoughts persisted. Rupert was a colonel in the regular army of the United States. He had been brevetted a brigadier-general after the Spanish War, and had commanded, not only a brigade, but a division at one critical time in the Philippines; but for reasons probably known to the little knot of politicians who "hung it up," although incomprehensible to most Americans, Congress had failed to pass the bill giving the wearers of brevet titles the right to keep their hard-won and empty honors; where-

fore General Winter had declined to Colonel Winter.

He had more substantial troubles, including a wound which would probably make him limp through life and possibly retire him from service at fifty. It had given him a six months' sick leave (which he had not wanted), and after spending a month on the Atlantic coast, he was going for the spring to the Pacific. Haley, whose own term of service had expired, had not reënlisted, but had followed him, Mrs. Haley and the baby uncomplainingly bringing up the rear. It was not fair to Haley nor to Mrs. Haley, the colonel felt. He had told Haley so; he had found a good situation for the man, and he had added the deed for a little house in the suburbs of Chicago.

If Haley wouldn't reënlist—there never was a better soldier since he had downed a foolish young hankering for wild times and whisky—if he wouldn't go back to the army, where he belonged, let him settle down, take up the honest carpenter's trade that he had abandoned, be a good citizen and marry little Nora to some classmate in the high school, who might make a fortune and build her a Colonial mansion, should the Colonial still obtain in the twentieth century.

The colonel had spread a grand prospect before Haley, who listened unresponsively, a dumb pain in his wide blue Irish eyes. The colonel hated it; but, somehow, he hated worse the limp look of Haley's back as he watched it dwindle down Michigan Avenue.

However, Mrs. Haley had been more satisfactory, if none the less bewildering. She seemed very grateful over the house and the three hundred dollars for its furnishing. A birthday present, he had termed it, with a flicker of humor because the day was his own birthday. His fiftieth birthday it happened to be, and it occurred to him that a man ought to do something a little notable on such an anniversary. This rounding of the half-century had attributes apart; it was no mere annual birthday; it marked the last vanishing flutter of the gilded draperies of youth; the withering of the garlands; the fading tinkle of the light music of hope. It should mark a man's solid achievements. Once, not so long ago, Winter had believed that his fiftieth birthday would see wide and beneficent and far-reaching results in the province where he ruled. That dream was shattered. He was generous of nature, and he could have been content to behold another reap the fields

which he had sown and tilled; it was the harvest, whether his or another's, for which he worked; but his had been the bitter office to have to stand aside, with no right to protest, and see his work go to waste because his successor had a feeble brain and a pusillanimous caution in place of his own dogged will. For all these reasons, as well as others, the colonel found no zest in his fiftieth birthday; and his reverie drifted dismally from one somber reflection to another until it brought up at the latest wound to his heart—his favorite brother's death.

There had been three Winter brothers—Rupert, Melville and Thomas. During the past year both Thomas Winter and his wife had died, leaving one child, a boy of fourteen, named Archibald after his father's uncle. Rupert Winter and the boy's great-aunt, the widow of the great-uncle for whom he had been named, were appointed joint guardians of the young Archie. To-night, in his jaded mood, he was assailed by reproaches because he had not seen more of his ward. Why, he hadn't so much as looked the little chap up when he passed through Fairport—merely had sent him a letter and some truck from the Philippines; nice guardian *he* was! By a natural enough transition,

his thoughts swerved to his own brief and not altogether happy married life. He thought of the graves in Arizona where he had left his wife and his two children, and his heart felt heavy. To escape musings which grew drearier every second, he cast his eyes about the motley crowd shuffling over the tiled floors or resting in the massive dark oaken seats. And it was then that he saw Cary Mercer. At first he did not recognize the face. He only gazed indifferently at two well-dressed men who sat some paces away from him in the shadow of a great tiled column similar to his own. There was this difference, it happened: the mission lantern with its electric bulbs above the two men was flashing brightly, and by some accident that above the colonel was dark. He could see the men, himself in the shadow.

The men were rather striking in appearance; they were evidently gentlemen; the taller one was young, well set-up, clean-shaven and quietly but most correctly dressed. His light brown hair showed a slight curl in its closely clipped locks; his gray-blue eyes had long lashes of brown darker than his hair; his teeth were very white, and there was a dimple in his cheek, plain when he smiled. Had his nose been straight he would

have been as handsome as a Greek god, but the nose was only an ordinary American nose, rather too broad at the base; moreover, his jaw was a little too square for classic lines. Nevertheless, he was good to look upon, as well as strong and clean and wholesome, and when his gray-blue eyes strayed about the room the dimple dented his cheek and his white teeth gleamed in a kind of merry good-nature pleasant to see. But it was the other man who held the colonel's eye. This man was double the young man's age, or near that; he was shorter, although still of fair stature, and slim of build. His face was oval in contour and delicate of feature. Although he wore no glasses, his brow had the far pucker of a near-sighted man. There was a mole on his cheek-bone and another just below his ear. Both were small, rather than large, and in no sense disfiguring; but the colonel noted them absently, being in the habit of photographing a man in a glance. The face had beauty, distinction even, yet about it hung some association, sinister as a poison label.

"Now, where," said the colonel to himself, "*where* have I seen that man?" Almost instantly the clue came to him. "By Jove, it's the brother!" he exclaimed. Three years ago, and he had almost

forgotten; but here was Cary Mercer—the name came to him after a little groping—here he was again; but who was the pleasant youngster with him? And what were they discussing with so little apparent and so much real earnestness?

One of the colonel's physical gifts was an extraordinary acuteness of hearing. It passed the mark of a faculty and became a marvel. Part of this uncanny power was really due, not to hearing alone, but to an alliance with another sense, because Winter had learned the lip language in his youth; he heard with his eyes as well as his ears. This combination had made an unintentional and embarrassed eavesdropper out of an honest gentleman a number of times. To set off such evil tricks it had saved his life once on the plains and had rescued his whole command another time in the Philippines. While he studied the two faces a sentence from the younger man gripped his attention. It was: "I don't mind the risk, but I hate taking such an old woman's money."

"She has a heap," answered the other man carelessly; "besides—" He added something with averted head and in too low a voice to reach the listener unassisted. But it was convincing, evi-

dently, since the young man's face grew both grave and stern. He nodded, muttering: "Oh, I understand; I wasn't backing water; I know we have lost the right to be squeamish. But I say, old chap, how long since Mrs. Winter has seen you? Would she recognize you?"

The colonel, who had been about to abandon his espionage as unbecoming a soldier and a gentleman, stowed away all his scruples at the mention of the name. He pricked up his ears and sharpened his eyes, but was careful lest they should catch his glance. The next sentence, owing to the speaker's position, was inaudible and invisible; but he clearly caught the young man's response:

"You're sure they'll be on this train?"

And he saw the interlocutor's head nod.

"The boy's with them?"

An inaudible reply, but another nod.

"And you're sure of Miss Smith?"

This time the other's profile was toward the listener, who heard the reply, "Plumb sure. I wish I were as sure of some other things. Have we settled everything? It is better not to be seen together."

"Yes, I think you've put me wise on the main

points. By the way, what *is* the penalty for kidnapping?"

Again an averted head and hiatus, followed by the younger man's sparkling smile and exclamation: "Wow! Riskier than foot-ball—and even more fun!" Something further he added, but his arms hid his mouth as he thrust them into his greatcoat, preparing to move away. He went alone; and the other, after a moment's gloomy meditation, gathered up coat and bag and followed. During that moment of arrested decision, however, his features had dropped into sinister lines which the colonel remembered.

"Dangerous customer, or I miss my guess," mused the soldier, who knew the passions of men. "I wonder—they couldn't mean my Aunt Rebecca? She's old; she has millions of money—but she's not on this train. And there's no Miss Smith in our deck. I'm so used to plotting I go off on fake hikes! Probably I'm getting old and dotty. Mercer, poor fellow, may have his brain turned and be an anarchist or a bomb-thrower or a dirty kidnapper for revenge; but that boy's a decent chap; I've licked too many second lieutenants into shape not to know something of youngsters."

"By the way what *is* the penalty for kidnapping?" Page 16

He pushed the idea away; or, rather, his own problems pushed it out of his mind, which went back to his ward and his single living brother. Melville had no children, only his wife's daughters, who were both married—Melville having married a widow with a family, an estate and a mind of her own. Melville was a professor in a state university, a mild, learned man whom nature intended for science but whom his wife was determined to make into the president of the university.

"Even money which will win," chuckled Rupert Winter to himself. "Millicent hasn't much tact; but she has the perseverance of the saints. *She* married Mel; he doesn't know, but she surely did. And she bosses him now. Well, I suppose Mel likes to be bossed; he never had any strenuous opinions except about the canals of Mars—*Valgame dios!*"

With a gasp the colonel sprang to his feet. There before him, in the flesh, was his sister-in-law. Her stately figure, her Roman profile, her gracefully gesticulating hand, which indicated the colonel's position to her heavily laden attendant, a lad in blue—these he knew by heart just as he knew that her toilet for the journey would be in

the latest mode, and that she would have the latest fashion of gait and mien. Millicent studied such things.

She waved her luggage into place—an excellent place—in the same breath dismissing the porter and instructing him when he must return. Then, but not until then, did she turn graciously to her brother-in-law.

"I hoped that I should find you, Bertie," she said in a voice of such creamy richness that it was hard to credit the speaker with only three short trips to England. "Melville said you were to take this train; and I was *so* delighted, *so* relieved! I am in a most harassing predicament, my dear Bertie."

"That's bad," murmured the colonel with sympathetic solicitude; "what's the trouble? Couldn't you get a section?"

"I have my reservations, but I don't know whether I shall go to-night."

"Maybe I'm stupid, Millicent, but I confess I don't know what you mean."

"Really, there's no reason why you should, Bertie. That's why I was so anxious to see you—in time, so that I might explain to you—might put you on your guard."

"Yes?" the colonel submitted; he never hurried a woman.

"I'm going to visit dear Amy—you remember she was married two years ago and lives in Pasadena; she has a dear little baby and the loveliest home! It's charming. And she was so delighted with your wedding gift, it was *so* original. Amy never did care for costly things; these simple, unique gifts always pleased her. Of course, my main object is to see the dear child, but I shall not go to-night *unless* Aunt Rebecca Winter is on the train. If for any reason she waits over until to-morrow I shall wait also."

"Ah," sighed the colonel very softly, not stirring a muscle of his politely attentive face; "and does Aunt Rebecca expect to go on the train?"

"They told me at the Pullman office that she had the drawing-room, the state-room and two sections. Of course, she has her maid with her and Archie—"

"Does *he* go, too?" the colonel asked, his eyes narrowing a little.

"Yes, she's taking him to California; he doesn't seem well enough, she thinks, to go to school, so he is to have a tutor out there. I'm a little afraid Aunt Rebecca mollycoddles the boy."

"Aunt Rebecca never struck me as a molly-coddler. I always considered her a tolerably cynical old Spartan. But do you mean there is any doubt of their going? Awfully good of you to wait to see if they don't go, but I'm sure Aunt Rebecca wouldn't want you to sacrifice your section—"

Mrs. Melville lifted a shapely hand in a Delsartian gesture of arrest; her smiling words were the last the colonel had expected. "Hush, dear Bertie; Aunt Rebecca doesn't *know* I am going. I don't want her to know until we are on the train."

"Oh, I see, a surprise?" But he did *not* see; and, with a quiet intentness, he watched the color raddle Mrs. Melville's smooth cheeks.

"Hardly," returned the lady. "The truth is, Bertie, Melville and I are worried about Aunt Rebecca. She, we fear, has fallen under the influence of a most plausible adventuress; I suppose you have heard of her companion, Miss Smith?"

"Can't say I have exactly," said the colonel placidly, but his eyes narrowed again. "Who is the lady?"

"I thought—I am *sure* Melville must have written you. But— Oh, yes, he wrote yesterday

to Boston. Well, Bertie, Miss Smith is a Southerner; she says she is a South Carolinian, but Aunt Rebecca picked her up in Washington, where she was with a kind of cousin of ours who was half crazy. Miss Smith took care of her and she died"—she fixed a darkling eye on the soldier —"she *died* and she left Miss Smith money."

"Much?"

"A few thousands. That is how Aunt Rebecca met her, and she pulled the wool over auntie's eyes, and they came back together. She's awfully clever."

"Young? Pretty?"

"Oh, dear, no. And she's nearer forty than thirty. Just the designing age for a woman when she's still wanting to marry some one but beginning to be afraid that she can't. Then such creatures always try to get *money*. If they can't marry it, and there's no man to set their caps for, they try to wheedle it out of some poor fool woman!" Millicent was in earnest, there was no doubt of that; the sure sign was her unconscious return to the direct expressions of her early life in the Middle West.

"And you think Miss Smith is trying to influence Aunt Rebecca?"

"Of course she is; and Aunt Rebecca is eighty, Rupert. And often while people of her age show no other sign of weakening intellect, they are not well regulated in their affections; they take fancies to people and get doting and clinging. She is getting to depend on Miss Smith. Really, that woman has more influence with her than all the rest of us together. She won't hear a word against her. Why! when I tried to suggest how little we knew about Miss Smith and that it would be better not to trust her *too* entirely, she positively *resented* it. Of course I used tact, too. I was so hurt, so surprised!" Mrs. Millicent was plainly aggrieved.

The colonel, who had his own opinion of the tact of his brother's wife, was not so surprised; but he made an inarticulate sound which might pass for sympathy.

"We've been worried a good deal," pursued Mrs. Melville, "about the way Aunt Rebecca has acted. She wouldn't stay in Fairport, where we could have some influence over her. She was always going south or going to the sea-shore or going *somewhere*. Sometimes I suspect Miss Smith made her, to keep her away from *us*, you know."

"Well, as long as I have known Aunt Rebecca

—anyhow, ever since Uncle Archibald died—she has been restless and flying about."

"Not as she is now. And then she only had her maid—"

"Oh, yes, Randall; she's faithful as they make 'em. What does *she* say about Miss Smith?"

"Bertie, she's won over Randall. Randall swears by her. Oh, she's *deep!*"

"Seems to be. But—excuse me—what's your game, Millicent? How do you mean to protect our aged kinswoman and, incidentally, of course, the Winter fortune?"

"I shall watch, Bertie; I shall be on my guard every waking hour. That deluded old woman is in more danger, perhaps, than you dream."

"As how?"

"Miss Smith"—her voice sank portentously—*"was a trained nurse."*

"What harm does that do—unless you think she would know too much about poisons?" The colonel laughed.

"It's no laughing matter, Bertie. Rebecca is so rich and this other woman is so poor, and, in my estimation, so ambitious. I make no insinuations, I only say she needs watching."

"You may be right about that," said the colonel

thoughtfully. "There is Haley and the boy for your bags!"

The boy picked up the big dress-suit case, the smaller dress-suit case and the hat case, he grabbed the bundle of cloaks, the case of umbrellas, and the lizard-skin bag. Dubiously he eyed the colonel's luggage, as he tried to disengage a finger.

"Niver moind, young feller," called Haley, peremptorily whisking away the nearest piece, "I'll help you a bit with yours, instead; you've a load, sure!"

Mrs. Melville explained in an undertone: "I take all the hand-luggage I possibly can; the overweight charges are wicked!"

"Haley, they won't let you inside without a ticket," objected the colonel. But Haley, unheeding, strode on ahead of the staggering youth.

"I have an English bath-tub, locked, of course, and packed with things, but he has put *that* in the car," said Mrs. Melville.

"Certainly," said the colonel absently; he was thinking: Mrs. Winter, the boy, Miss Smith—how ridiculously complete! Decidedly *something* will bear watching.

CHAPTER II

AUNT REBECCA

No sooner was Mrs. Melville ushered into her section than the colonel went through the train. He was not so suspicious as he told himself he might have been, with such a dovetailing of circumstances into his accidentally captured information; he couldn't yet read villainy on that college lad's frank face. But no reason, therefore, to neglect precautions. "Hope the best of men and prepare for the worst," was the old campaigner's motto.

A walk through the cars showed him no signs of the two men. It was a tolerably complete inspection, too. There was only one drawing-room or state-room of which he did not manage to get a glimpse—the closed room being the property of a very great financial magnate, whose private car was waiting for him in Denver. His door was fast, and the click of the type-writer announced the tireless industry of our rulers.

But if he did not find the college boy or the man

with the moles he did get a surprise for his walk; namely, the sight of the family of Haley, and Haley himself beside their trig, battered luggage, in a section of the car next his own. Mrs. Haley turned a guilty red, while Haley essayed a stolid demeanor.

"What does this mean?" demanded the colonel.

"Haley felt he would *have* to go with you, Colonel," replied Mrs. Haley, who had timid, wide, blue eyes and the voice of a bird, but a courage under her panic, as birds have, too, when their nests are in peril. "We've rinted the house to a good man with grown-up children, and Haley can get a job if you won't want him."

"Yis, sor," mumbled Haley. He was standing at attention, as was his wife, the toddling Nora being held in the posture of respect on the plush seat.

"And I suppose you took the furniture money to buy tickets?"

"Yis, sor."

"And you're bound to go with me?"

"Yis, sor," said Haley.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Sergeant," said the colonel; but he was glad at the heart of him for this mutinous loyalty.

"Yis, sor," said Haley.

"Well, since you are here, I engage you from to-day, you understand."

"Yis, sor," said Haley. Mrs. Haley whimpered a blessing; but the only change in the soldier was that his military stolidity became natural and real instead of forced.

"Sit down on this seat over here with me and I'll tell you what I want. You fraud, letting me say good-by to you—"

"I didn't want to take the liberty, sor, but you *made* me shake hands. I was afraid you'd catch on, sor. 'Tis a weight off me moind, sor."

"I dare say. You always have your way with me, you old mule. Now listen; I want you to be on the watch for two men"—thereupon the colonel described his men, laying special stress on the moles on the face of one, and the other's dimple.

Having set Haley his tasks, he went back to his car in better spirits.

By this time the train was moving. He had seen his kinswoman and her party enter; and he found the object of Mrs. Melville's darksome warnings sitting with a slender lad in the main body of the car. Aunt Rebecca was in the drawing-room, her maid with her. Mrs. Melville, who

had already revealed her presence, sat across the aisle. She presented the colonel at once.

Miss Smith did not look formidable; she looked "nice," thought the colonel. She was of medium height; she was obviously plump, although well proportioned; her presence had an effect of radiant cleanliness, her eyes were so luminous and her teeth so fine and her white shirt-waist so immaculate. There was about her a certain soft illumination of cheerfulness, and at the same time a restful repose; she moved in a leisurely fashion and she sat perfectly still. "I never saw any one who looked less of an adventuress," Winter was thinking, as he bowed. Then swiftly his glance went to the lad, a pale young fellow with hazel eyes and a long slim hand which felt cold.

The boy made a little inarticulate sound in his throat and blushed when Colonel Winter addressed him. But he looked the brighter for the blush. It was not a plain face; rather an interesting one in spite of its listlessness and its sickly pallor; its oval was purely cut, the delicate mouth was closed firmly enough, and the hazel eyes with their long lashes would be beautiful were they not so veiled.

"He has the Winter mouth, at least," noted the

colonel. He felt a novel throb at his heart. Had his own boy lived, the baby that died when it was born, he would be only a year older than Archie. At least, this boy was of his own blood. Without father or mother, but *not* alone in the world; and, if any danger menaced, not without defenders. The depression which had enveloped him lifted as mist before the sun, burned away by the mere thought of possible difficulties. "We will see if any one swindles you out of your share," said Rupert Winter, compressing the Winter mouth more firmly, "or if those gentlemanly kidnappers mean you."

His ebbing suspicion of the boy's companion revived; he would be on his guard, all right.

"Aunt Rebecca wants to see you," Mrs. Melville suggested. "She is in the drawing-room with her solitaire."

"Still playing Penelope's Web?"

"Oh, she always comes back to it. But she plays bridge, too; Rupert, I hear your game is a wonder. Archie's been learning, so he could play with you."

"Good for Archie!"—he shot a glance and a smile at the lad's reddening face—"we'll have a game."

"Lord, I wish he didn't look quite so ladylike," he was grumbling within, as he dutifully made his way to his aunt's presence.

The electric lights flooded the flimsy railway table on which were spread rows of small-sized cards. An elderly lady of quality was musing over the pasteboard rows. A lady of quality—that was distinctly the phrase to catch one's fancy at the first glimpse of Mrs. Winter. Not an aged lady, either, for even at eighty that elegantly moulded, slim figure, that abundance of silvery hair—parted in the middle and growing thickly on each side in nature's own fashion, which art can not counterfeit, as well as softly puffed and massed above—that exquisitely colored and textured skin, strangely smooth for her years, with tiny wrinkles of humor, to be sure, about the eyes, but with cheeks and skin unmarred; that fine, firmly carved profile, those black eyebrows and lashes and still brilliant dark eyes; most of all that erect, alert, dainty carriage, gave no impression of age; but they all, and their accessories of toilet and manner, and a little prim touch of an older, more reticent day in both dress and bearing, recalled the last century phrase.

A soft gray bunch of chinchilla fur lay where

she had slipped it on her soft gray skirts; one hand rested in the fur—her left hand—and on the third finger were the only rings which she wore, a band of gold, worn by sixty years, and a wonderful ruby, wherein (at least such was Rupert's phantasy) a writhing flame was held captive by its guard of diamond icicles. The same rings admired by her nephew ever since he was a cadet—just the same smiling, inscrutable, high-bred, unchanging old dame!

"Good evening, Aunt Rebecca; not a day older!" said the colonel.

"Good evening, Bertie," returned the lady, extending a hand over the cards; "excuse my not rising to greet you; I might joggle the cards. Of course I'm not a day older; I don't dare to grow older at my age! Sit down. I'm extremely glad to see you; I've a heap to talk to you about. Do you mind if I run this game through first?"

The colonel didn't mind. He raised the proffered hand to his lips; such homage seemed quite the most natural act in the world with Mrs. Winter. And he unobtrusively edged his own lean and wiry person into the vacant seat opposite her.

"How far are you going?" said she, after a few moves of the cards.

"My ticket says Los Angeles; but it had to say something, so I chose Los Angeles for luck; I'm an irresponsible tramp now, you know; and I may drop off almost anywhere. You are for southern California, aren't you?"

"Eventually; but we shall stop at San Francisco for two or three weeks."

"Do you mind if I stop off with you? I want to get acquainted with my ward," said the colonel.

"That's a good idea, Bertie."

"He seems rather out of sorts; you aren't worried about—well, tuberculosis or that sort of thing?"

"I am worried about just that sort of thing; although the doctor says nothing organic at all is the matter with him; but he is too melancholy for a boy; he needs rousing; losing his father and mother in one year, you know, and he was devoted to them. I can't quite make him out, Bertie; he hasn't the Winter temperament. I suppose he has a legal right to his mother's nature; but it is very annoying. It makes him so much harder to understand—not that she wasn't a good woman who made Tom happy; but she wasn't a Winter. However, Janet has brightened him up consider-

ably—you've seen Janet—Miss Smith? What do you think of her?"

Winter said honestly that she was very nice-looking and that she looked right capable; he fell into the idiom of his youth sometimes when with a Southerner.

"She is," said Aunt Rebecca.

"Where did you find her?" asked the colonel carelessly, inspecting the cards.

Aunt Rebecca smiled. "I thought Millicent would have given you all the particulars. She was nurse, secretary, companion and diet cook to Cousin Angela Nelson; when *she* died I got her. Lucky for me."

"So I should judge," commented the colonel politely.

"I presume Millicent has told you that she is an adventuress and after my money and a heap more stuff. If she hasn't she will. Get a notion once in Millicent's head and a surgical operation is necessary to dislodge it! Janet is the only mortal person who could live with poor Cousin Angela, who had enough real diseases to kill her and enough imaginary ones to kill anybody who lived with her! Janet made her comfortable, would not stand everything on earth from her—though she

did stand a heap—and really cared for her. When she died Cousin Angela left her some money; not very much, but a few thousands. She would have left her more, but Janet wouldn't let her. She left some to some old servants, who surely deserved it for living with *her,* some to charities and the rest to her sisters, who hadn't put a foot inside the house for fifteen years, but naturally resented her not giving them everything. I reckon they filled Millicent up with their notions." She pushed the outspread cards together.

"You had several moves left," said the colonel.

"Four. But then, I was finished. Bertie, you play bridge, of course; and I used to hear of your whist triumphs; how did you happen to take to whist?"

"To fill up the time, I reckon. I began it years ago. Now a soldier's life is a great deal more varied, because a man will be shifted around and get a show of the different kinds of service. And there are the exams., and the Philippines—oh, plenty of diversions. But in the old days a man in the line was billed for an awfully stupid time. I didn't care to take to drink; and I couldn't read as you do if I'd had books, which I hadn't, so I took to playing cards. I played skat and poker and

whist, and of late years I've played bridge. Millicent plays?"

"Millicent is a celebrated player. She was a great duplicate-whist player, you know. To see Millicent in her glory, one should play duplicate with her. I'm only a chump player; my sole object is to win tricks."

"What else should it be?"

Aunt Rebecca smiled upon him. "To give information to your partner. The main object of the celebrated American-leads system is signaling information to your partner. Incidentally, one tells the adversaries, as well as one's partner, which, however, doesn't count really as much as you might think; for most people don't notice what their partners play *very* much, and don't notice what their adversaries play at all. Millicent is always so busy indicating things to her partner and watching for his signals and his indications that you can run a cross ruff in on her without her suspecting. She asked me once if she didn't play an intelligible game, and I told her she did; a babe in arms could understand it. She didn't seem quite pleased."

"How about Archie? Can he play a good game?"

"Very fair for a boy of fourteen; he was fond of whist until his troubles came," said Mrs. Winter, with a faint clouding of her keen gaze. "Since then he hasn't taken much interest in anything. Janet has brightened him up more than any one; and when he heard you were coming that did rouse him. You are one of his heroes. He's that sort of a boy," she added, with a tinge of impatience in her soft Southern voice. As if to divert her thoughts, she began deftly moving the cards before her. Her hands showed the blue veins more prominently than they show in young hands. This was their only surrender to time; they were shapely and white, and the slim fingers were as straight as when the beaux of Fairfax County would have ridden all day for a chance to kiss them.

The colonel watched the great ruby wink and glow. The ruby was a part of his memories of his aunt; she had always worn it. He remembered it, when she used to come and visit him at the hotel at West Point, dazzling impartially officers, professors, cadets and hotel waiters. Was that almost forty years ago? Well, thirty-four, anyhow! She had been very good, very generous to all the young Winters, then. Indeed, although

she never quite forgave him for not marrying the wife of her selecting, she had always been kind and generous to Rupert; yet, somehow, while he had admired and found a humorous joy in his Aunt Rebecca, he wondered if he had ever loved her. She was both beautiful and brilliant when she was young, a Southern belle, a Northern society leader; her life was full of conquests; her footsteps, which had wandered over the world, had left a phosphorescent wake of admiration. She had always been a personage. She was a power in Washington after the war; they had found her uniquely delightful in royal courts long before Americans were the fashion; she had been of importance in New York, and they had loved her epigrams in Boston; now, in her old age, she held a veritable little court of her own in the provincial Western city which had been her husband's home. He went to Congress from Fairport; he had made a fortune there, and when he died, many years ago, in Egypt, back to his Western home, with dogged determination and lavish expenditures of both money and wit, his widow had brought him to rest. The most intense and solemn experience of a woman she had missed, for no children had come to them, but her hus-

band had been her lover so long as he lived, and she had loved him. She had known great men; she had lived through wonderful events; and often her hand had been on those secret levers which move vast forces. She had been in tragedies, if an inviolable coolness of head, perhaps of heart, had shielded her from being of them. The husband of her youth, the nearest of her blood, the friends of her middle life—all had gone into the dark; yet here she sat, with her smooth skin and her still lustrous eyes and her fragrant hands, keenly smiling over her solitaire. The colonel wondered if he could ever reconcile himself with such philosophy to his own narrowed and emptied life; she was older than he, yet she could still find a zest in existence. All the great passions gone; all the big interests; and still her clever mind was working, happy, possibly, in its mere exercise, disdaining the stake, she who had had every success. What a vitality! He looked at her, puzzling. Her complexity bewildered him, he not being of a complex nature himself. As he looked, suddenly he found himself questioning why her face, in its revival of youthful smoothness and tint, recalled some other face, recently studied by him—a face that had worn an abso-

lutely different expression; having the same delicate aquiline nose, the same oval contour, the same wide brows—who? who? queried the colonel. Then he nodded. Of course; it was the man with the moles, the brother. He looked enough like Mrs. Winter to be her kinsman. At once he put his guess to the test. "Aunt Becky," said he, "have you any kin I don't know about?"

"I reckon not. I'm an awfully kinless old party," said she serenely. "I was a Winter, born as well as married, and so you and Mel and Archie are double kin to me. I was an only child, so I haven't anything closer than third or fourth cousins, down in Virginia and Boston."

"Have you, by chance, any cousin, near or far, named Mercer?"

Resting her finger-tips on the cards, Aunt Rebecca seemed to let her mind search amid Virginian and Massachusetts genealogical tables. "Why, certainly," she answered after a pause, "there was General Philemon Mercer—Confederate army, you know—and his son, Sam Nelson; Phil was my own cousin and Sam Nelson my second, and Sam Nelson's sons would be my third, wouldn't they? Phil and Sam are both dead, and Winnie Lee, the daughter, is dead, and poor Phil

—the grandson, you know—poor boy, *he* shot himself while at Harvard; but his brother Cary is alive."

"Do you know him?"

"Never saw him but once or twice. He has very good manners."

"Is he rich?"

"He was, but after he had spent his youth working with incredible industry and a great deal of ability to build up a steel business and had put it into a little combination—not a big trust, just a genuine corporation—some of the financial princes wanted it for a club—to knock down bigger game, I reckon—and proceeded to cheapen the stock in order to control it. Cary held on desperately, bought more than he could hold, mortgaged everything else; but they were too big for him to fight. It was in 1903, you know, when they had an alleged financial panic, and scared the banks. Cary went to the wall, and Phil with him, and poor Phil killed himself. Afterward Cary's wife died; he surely did have a mean time. And, to tell you the truth, Bertie, I think there has been a little kink in Cary's mind ever since."

"Did you hold any of Cary's stock?" He was piecing his puzzle together.

"Yes, but my stock was all paid for, and I held on to it; now it is over par and paying dividends. Oh, the property was all right, had it been kept in honest hands and run for itself. The trouble with Cary was that in order to keep control of the property he bought a lot of shares on margins, and when they began to run downhill, he was obliged to borrow money on his actual holdings to protect his fictitious ones. The stock went so low that he was wiped out. He wouldn't take my advice earlier in the game; and I knew that it would only be losing money to lend it to him, later—still, sometimes I have been rather sorry I didn't. Would I better try the spade, Bertie, or the diamond?"

The colonel advised the spade. He wondered whether he should repeat to his aunt the few sentences which he had overheard from Mercer and his companion; but a belief that old age worries easily, added to his natural man's disinclination to attack the feminine nerves, tipped the scales against frankness. So, instead, he began to talk about Archie; what was he like? was he fond of athletics? or was he a bookish lad? Aunt Rebecca reported that he had liked riding and golf; but he was not very rugged, and since his father's

death he had seemed listless to a degree. "But he is better now," she added with a trace of eagerness quite foreign to her usual manner. "Janet Smith has roused him up; and what do you suppose she has done? But really, you are the cause."

"I?" queried the colonel.

"Just you. Archie, Janet argued, is the kind of nature that must have some one to be devoted to."

"And has he taken a fancy to her? Or to you?"

Aunt Rebecca's eyes dulled a little and her delicate lips were twisted by a smile which had more wistfulness than humor in it. "I'm not a lovable person; anyhow, he does not love easily. We are on terms of the highest respect, even admiration, but we haven't got so far as friendship, far less comradeship. Janet is different. But I don't mean Janet; she has grown absurdly fond of him; and I think he's fond of her; but what she did was to make him fond of you. You, General Rupert Winter; why, that boy could pass an examination on your exploits and not miss a question. Janet and he have a scrap-book with every printed word about you, I do believe. And she has been amazingly shrewd. We didn't know how to get the youngster back to his sports while he was out of school; and, in fact, an old woman like me is

rather bewildered by such a young creature, anyhow; but Janet rode with him; *you* are a remarkable rider; I helped there, because I remembered some anecdotes about you at West Point—"

"But, my dear Aunt—"

"Don't interrupt, Bertie, it's a distinctly American habit. And we read in the papers that you had learned that Japanese trick fighting—jiu-jitsu—and were a wonder—"

"I'm not, I assure you; that beast of a newspaper man—"

"Never mind, if you are not a wonder, you'll have to be; you can take lessons in Los Angeles; there are quantities of Japs there. Why, even in Chicago, Janet picked up one, and we imported him, and Archie took lessons, and practises every day. There's a book in my bag, in the rack there, a very interesting book; Janet and I have both read it so we could talk to Archie. You would better skim it over a little if you really aren't an expert, enough so you can *talk* jiu-jitsu, anyhow; we can't be destroying Archie's ideals until he gets a better appetite."

"Well, upon my word!" breathed the colonel. "Do you expect me to be a fake hero? I never took more than two lessons in my life. That re-

porter interviewed my teacher, who was killed in the Japanese War, by the way; he went to the army after my second lesson. He didn't know any English beyond 'yes' and 'if you please'; and he used them both on the reporter, who let his own fancy go up like a balloon. Well, where is the book?"

He found it easily; and with a couple of volumes of another kidney, over which he grinned.

"*The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *The Leavenworth Case!* I've read them, too," he said; "they're great! And do you still like detective stories? You would have made a grand sleuth yourself, Aunt Becky." Again he had half a mind to speak of the occurrence at the station; again he checked the impulse. "I remember," he added, "that you used to hold strenuous opinions."

"You mean my thinking that the reason crimes escape discovery is not that criminals are so bright, but that detectives in general are so particularly stupid? Oh, yes, I think that still. So does Sir Conan Doyle. And I have often wished I could measure my own wits, once, with a really *fine* criminal intellect. It would be worth the risk."

"God forbid!" said the colonel hastily.

There came a tap on the door.

"Millicent!" groaned Aunt Rebecca. "I know the creaking of her stays. No, don't stay, Bertie; go and get Janet and a rescue bridge party as quick as you can!"

"The original and only Aunt Rebecca," thought the colonel at the door, smiling. But, somehow, the handsome old dame never had seemed so nearly human to him before.

CHAPTER III

THE TRAIN ROBBERS

When the colonel awoke next morning the train was running smoothly over the Iowa prairies, while low hills and brick factory chimneys announced Council Bluffs. The landscape was wide and monotonous; a sweep of illimitable cornfields in their winter disarray, or bleakly fresh from the plow, all painted with a palette holding only drabs and browns; here and there a dab of red in a barn or of white in windmill or house; but these livelier tints so scattered that they were no more than pin spots on the picture. The very sky was as dimly colored as the earth, lighter, yet of no brighter hue than the fog which smoked up from the ground. Later in the spring this same landscape would be of a delicate and charming beauty; in summer or autumn it would make the beholder's pulses throb with its glorious fertility; but on a blurred March morning it was as dreary as the reveries of an aging man who has failed.

Nevertheless, Rupert Winter's first conscious sensation was not depression, only a little tingle of interest and excitement, such as stings pleasantly one who rises to a prospect of conflict in which he has the confidence of his own strength. "By Jove!" he wondered, "whatever makes me feel so kiddish?"

His first impulse was to peep through his curtains into the car. It wore its early morning aspect of muffled berths and stuffy curtains, among which Miss Smith's trig, carefully finished presence in a fresh white shirt-waist, attended by the pleasant whiffs of cologne water, gave the beholder a certain refreshing surprise. One hand (white and firm and beautifully cared for) held a wicker bottle, source of the pleasant whiffs; her sleek back braids were coiled about her comely head, and the hair grew very prettily in a blunted point on the creamy nape of her neck. It was really dark brown hair, but it looked black against the whiteness of her skin. She had very capable-looking shoulders, the colonel noted, and a flat back; perhaps she wasn't pretty, but in a long while he had not seen a more attractive-looking woman. She made him think of a Bonne Celine rose, somehow. He could hear her talking to some

one behind the berth's curtains. Could those doleful moans emerge from Archie? Could a Winter boy be whimpering about the jar of the train in that fashion? Immediately he was aware that the sufferer was Randall, for Miss Smith spoke: "Drink the tea, and lie down again, I'll attend to Mrs. Winter. Don't you worry!"

"Getting solid with Randall," commented the colonel. "Which is she—kind-hearted, or an accomplished villainess? Well, it's interesting, anyhow."

By the time he had made his toilet the train was slacking speed ready to halt in Council Bluffs, and all his suspicions rushed on deck again at the sight of Miss Smith and Archie walking outside.

He joined them, and he had to admit that Miss Smith looked as pleased as Archie at his appearance. Nor did she send a single furtive glance, slanting or backward, while they walked in the crisp, clean air. Once the train had started and Miss Smith was in the drawing-room, breakfasting with Mrs. Winter and Archie, he politely attended Mrs. Millicent through the morning meal in the dining-car. It was so good a meal that he naturally, although illogically, thought better of

Miss Smith's prospects of innocence; and cheerily he sought Haley. He found him in the smoking compartment of the observation-car, having for companions no less personages than the magnate and a distinguished-looking New Englander, who, Rupert Winter made no doubt, was a Harvard professor of rank and renown among his learned kind. He knew the earmarks of the species. The New Englander's pencil was flying over a little improvised pad of telegraph blanks, while he listened with absorbed interest to Haley's rich Irish tones. There was a little sidewise lunge of Haley's mouth, a faint twinkle of Haley's frank and simple eyes which the colonel appraised at very nearly their real value. He knew that it isn't in Irish-American nature to perceive a wide-open ear and not put something worth hearing into it. Besides, his sharp ears had brought him a key to the discourse, a sorrowful remark of the sergeant's as he entered: "Yes, sor, thim wather torchures is *terrible!*"

He glanced suspiciously from one of Haley's audience to the other. The newspaper cartoonist had pictured on all kinds of bodies of preying creatures, whether of the earth or air, the high brows, the round head, the delicate features, the

thin cheeks, the straight line of the mouth, and the mild, inexpressive eyes of the man before him. He had been extolled as a far-sighted benefactor of the world, and execrated picturesquely as the king of pirates who would scuttle the business of his country without a qualm.

Winter, amid his own questionings and problems, could not help a scrutiny of a man whose power was greater than that of medieval kings. He sat consuming a cigarette, more between his fingers than his lips; and glancing under drooping eyelids from questioner to narrator. At the colonel's entrance he looked up, as did Haley, who rose to his feet with an unconscious salute. "I'd be glad to spake wid youse a minnit, if I might, General," said Haley, "about where I put your dress-shute case, sor."

The colonel, of course, did not expect any remarks about a suit-case when he got Haley by himself at the observation end of the car; but what he did get was of sufficient import to drive out of his mind a curt lecture about blackening the reputation of the army with lies about the Philippines. Haley had told him that he had seen the man with the two moles on his face jump out of his own car at Council Bluffs. He had simply

stood on the platform, looking to right and left for a moment; then he had swung himself back on the car. Haley had watched him walk down the aisle and enter the drawing-room. He did not come out; Haley had found out that the drawing-room belonged to Edwin S. Keatcham, "the big railroad man, sor."

"It doesn't seem likely that *he* would be an accomplice of a kidnapper," mused the colonel. "The man might have gone in there while he was out."

"Sure, he might, sor; 'twas mesilf thinking that same; and I wint beyant to the observation-car, and there the ould gintleman was smoking."

"And you stopped to tell yarns to that other gentleman instead of getting back and following—"

"No, sor, I beg your pardon, sor; I was kaping me eyes open and on him; for himsilf was in the observation-car where you are now, sor, until we come in, and thin he walked back, careless like, to his own car. Will I be afther following him?"

"Yes; don't lose him."

They did not lose him; they both saw him enter the drawing-room and almost immediately come out and sit down in one of the open sections

"See if you can't find out from the conductor where he is going," the colonel proposed to Haley; and he frowned over his thoughts for a bad quarter of an hour at the window. The precipitate of all this mental ferment was a determination to stick close to the boy, saying nothing. He hoped that when they stopped overnight at Salt Lake City, according to Aunt Rebecca's plan, they might shake off the "brother's" company. The day passed uneventfully. He played bridge with Mrs. Millicent and Miss Smith and Archie, while Aunt Rebecca kept up her French with one of Bentzon's novels.

Afterward she said grimly to him: "I think you must have been converted out in the Philippines; you never so much as winced, that last hand; no, you sat there smiling over your ruin as sweetly as if you enjoyed it."

The colonel smiled again. "Ah, but, you see, I did enjoy it; didn't you notice the hand? No? Well, it was worth watching. It was the rubber game; they were twenty-four and we were twenty-six and we were on the seventh round; Miss Smith had made it hearts. She sat on my left, dummy on my right. Millicent had the lead. She had four little spades, a little club, the queen of

hearts and a trey; dummy had the queen, the ten and the nine of spades, it had the king of hearts and three clubs with the jack at the top. I had a lovely diamond suit which I hadn't had a chance to touch, top sequence, ace, king, queen; I had the jack of trumps and the jack of spades; and the queen and a little club. I hadn't a lead, you understand; Millicent had taken five tricks and they had taken one; they needed six to win the game, we needed two; see? Well, Millicent hadn't any diamonds to lead me, and unhappily she didn't think to lead trumps through dummy, which would have made a world of difference. She led a club; dummy put on the jack. I knew Miss Smith had the ace and one low heart; no clubs, a lot of low diamonds, and she might or might not have a spade. I figured that she had the ace and a little one; if she would trump in with the little one, as ninety-nine out of a hundred women would have done, her ace and her partner's king would fall together; or, at worst, he would have to trump her diamond lead, after she had led out her king of spades, and lead spades, which I could trump and bring in all my diamonds. Do you take in the situation?"

"You mean that Janet had the king of spades

alone, the ace and the little trump and four worthless diamonds? I see. It is a chance for the grand-*coup;* I reckon she played it."

"She *did!*" cried the colonel with unction. "She slapped that ace on the trick, she modestly led her king of spades, gathered in my jack, then 'she stole, she stole my child away,' my little jack of trumps; it fell on dummy's king, and dummy led out his spades and I had to see that whole diamond suit slaughtered. They made their six tricks, the game and the rubber; and I wanted to clap my hands over the neatness of it."

"She is a good player," agreed Aunt Rebecca, "and a very pleasant person. You remember the epitaph, don't you, Bertie? 'She was so pleasant.' Yet Janet has had a heap of trouble; but, after all, happiness is not a condition but a temperament; I suppose Janet has the temperament. She's a good loser, too; and she never takes advantage of the rules."

"She certainly loves a straight game," reflected the colonel. "I confess I don't like the kind of woman that is always grabbing a trick if some one plays out of the wrong hand."

He said something of the kind to Millicent, obtaining but scant sympathy in that quarter.

"She's deep, Bertie; I told you that," was the only reply, "but I'm watching. I have reason for my feeling."

"Maybe you have been misinformed," ventured her brother-in-law with proper meekness.

"Not at all," retorted she sharply. "I happen to know that she worked against me with the Daughters."

"Daughters," the colonel repeated inanely, "your daughters?"

"Certainly not! The Daughters of the Revolution."

"It's a mighty fine society, that; did a lot during the Spanish War. And you are the state president, aren't you?"

"No, Rupert," returned Mrs. Melville with dignity, "I am no longer state regent. By methods that would shame the most hardened men politicians I was defeated; why! didn't you read about it?"

"You know I only came back from the Philippines in February."

"It was in all the Chicago papers. I was interviewed myself. I assure you the other candidates (there were two) tried the very *lowest* political methods. Melville said it was scandalous.

There were at least three luncheons given against me. It wasn't the congress, it was the lobby defeated me. And their methods! I would not believe that gentlewoman could stoop to such infamy of misrepresentation." The colonel chewed his mustache; he felt for that reporter of the Chicago paper; he was evidently getting a phonographic record now; he made an inarticulate rumble of sympathy in his throat which was as the clucking of the driver to the mettled horse. Mrs. Melville gesticulated with Delsartian grace, as she poured forth her woes.

"They accused me of a domineering spirit; they said I was trying to set up a machine. *I!* I worked for them, many a time, half the night, at my desk; never was a letter unanswered; I did half the work of the corresponding secretary; yet at the crucial moment *she betrayed me!* I learned more in those two days of the petty jealousy, the pitiless malevolence of *some* women than I had known all my life before; but at the same time, to the faithful band of friends"—the colonel had the sensation of listening to the record again—"whose fidelity was proof against ridicule and cruel misrepresentation, I return a gratitude that will never wane. Rupert"—she turned herself in

the seat and waved the open palm of her hand in a graceful and dramatic gesture, "—those women not only stooped to malignant falsehoods, they not only trampled parliamentary law underfoot, but they circulated through the hall a cartoon called the *Making of the Slate.* Of course, we had our quarters at a hotel, and after the evening meeting, after I had retired, in fact, a bell-boy brought me a message; it was necessary to have a meeting at once, to decide for the secretaryship, as we had found out Mrs. Ellennere was false. The ladies in the adjoining rooms and the others of us on the board who were loyal came into my chamber. Rupert, will you believe it, those women had a grotesque picture of *us,* with faces cut out of the newspapers—of course, all our pictures were in the papers—and they had the audacity and the meanness to picture me in—in the garments of night!"

"That was pretty tough. But where does Miss Smith come in?"

"She was at the convention. She is a Daughter. I've always said we are too lax in our admissions."

"Who drew the picture?"

"It may not be Miss Smith, but—she does

draw. I'm *sure* that she worked against me; she covered up her footprints so that I have no proof; but I suspect her. She's deep, Bertie, she's deep. But she can't hoodwink *me*. I'll find her out."

The colonel experienced the embarrassment that is the portion of a rash man trying to defend one woman against another; he retreated because he perceived defense was in vain; but he did not feel his growing opinion of Miss Smith's innocence menaced by Mrs. Melville's convictions.

She played too square a game for a kidnapper —and Smith was the commonest of names. No, there must be some explanation; Rupert Winter had lived too long not to distrust the plausible surface clue. "It is the improbable that always happens, and the impossible most of the time," Aunt Rebecca had said once. He quite agreed with her whimsical phrase.

Nothing happened to arouse his suspicions that day. Haley reported that Cary Mercer was going on to San Francisco. The conductor did not know his name; he seemed to know Mr. Keatcham and was with him in his drawing-room most of the time. Had the great man a secretary with him? Yes, he seemed to have, a little fellow who had not much to say for himself, and jumped

whenever his boss spoke to him. There was also a valet, an Englishman, who did not respond properly to conversational overtures. They were all going to get off at Denver.

Haley was not misinformed, as the colonel perceived with his own eyes—and he saw Cary Mercer bow in parting to the great man, who requited the low salute with a gruff nod. Here was an opportunity for a nearer glimpse of Mercer, possibly for that explanation in which Winter still had a lurking hope. He caught Mercer just in the car doorway, and politely greeted him: "Mr. Mercer, I think? You may not remember me, Colonel Winter. I met you in Cambridge, three years ago—"

It seemed a brutal thing to do, to recall a meeting under such circumstances; but if Mercer could give the explanation he would excuse him; it was better than suspecting an innocent man. But there was no opportunity for explanation. Mercer turned a blank and coldly suspicious face toward him. "I beg pahdon," he said in his Southern way, "I think you have made a mistake in the person."

"And are you *not* Mr. Cary Mercer?" The colonel felt the disagreeable resemblance of his

own speeches to those made in newspaper stories by the gentleman who wishes his old friend to change a fifty-dollar bill or to engage in an amusing game with a thimble. Mercer saw it as well as he. "Try some one from the country," he remarked with an unpleasant smile, brushing past, while the color mounted to the colonel's tanned cheek. "The *next* time you meet me," Rupert Winter vowed, "you'll know me."

A new porter had come on at Denver; a light brown, chubby, bald man with a face that radiated friendliness. He was filled with the desire for conversation, and he had worked on the road for eight years, hence could supplement *Over the Range* and the other guide-books with personal gossip. He showed marked deference to the colonel, which that unassuming and direct man could not quite fathom, until Archie enlightened him. Archie smiled, a queer, chewed-up smile which the colonel hailed with:

"Why are you making fun of me, young man?"

"It's Lewis, the porter; he follows you round and listens to you in such an awestruck way."

"But why?"

"Why, Sergeant Haley told him about you;

and I told him a *little*, and he says he wishes you'd been on the train when they had the hold-ups. This is an awful road for hold-ups, he says. He's been at five hold-ups."

"And what does he advise?"

"Oh, he says, hold up your hands and they won't hurt you."

"Well, I reckon his advice is sound," laughed the colonel. "See you follow it, Archie."

"Shall *you* hold up your hands, Uncle Bertie?" asked Archie.

"Much the wisest course; these fellows shoot."

Archie looked disappointed. "I suppose so," he sighed. "I'm afraid I'd want to, if they were pointing pistols at me. Lewis was on the train once when a man showed fight. He wouldn't put up his hands, and the bandit plugged him, like a flash; he fell crosswise over the seat and the blood spurted across Lewis' wrist; he said it was like a hot jet of water."

The homely and bizarre horror of the picture had evidently struck home to Archie; he half shivered.

"Too much imagination," grumbled the colonel to himself. "A Winter ought to take to fighting like a duck to water!" He betook himself

to Miss Smith; and he was uneasily conscious that he was going to her for consoling. But he felt better after a little talk about Archie with her. Plainly she thought Archie had plenty of spirit; although, of course, he hadn't told her about the bandits. The negro was "kidding" the passengers; and women shouldn't be disturbed by such nonsense. The colonel had old-fashioned views of guarding his womankind from the harsh ways of the world. Curious, he reflected, what sense Miss Smith seemed to have; and how she understood things. He felt better acquainted with her than a year's garrison intercourse would have made him with any other woman he knew.

That afternoon, they two sat watching the fantastic cliffs which took grotesque semblance of ruined castles crowning their barren hillsides; or of deserted amphitheaters left by some vanished race to crumble. They had talked of many things. She had told him of the sleepy old South Carolinian town where she was born, and the plantation and the distant cousin who was like her mother, and the hospital where she had been taught, and the married sister who had died. Such a narrow, laborious, innocent existence as she described! How cheerfully, too, she had

shouldered her burdens! They talked of the South and of the Philippines; a little they talked of Archie and his sorrow and of the eternal problems that have troubled the soul of man since first death entered the world. As they talked, the colonel's suspicions faded into grotesque shadows. "Millicent is ridiculous," quoth he. Then he fell to wondering whether there had been a romance in Miss Smith's past life. "Such a handsome woman would look high," he sighed. Only twenty-four hours ago he had called Miss Smith "nice-looking," with careless criticism. He was quite unconscious of his change of view. That night he felt lonely, of a sudden; the old wound in his heart ached; his future looked as bleak as the mountain-walled plains through which he was speeding. After a long time the train stopped with a jar and rattle, ending in a sudden shock. He raised the curtain to catch the flash of the electric lights at Glenwood. Out of the deep defile they glittered like diamonds in a pool of water. Why should he think of Miss Smith's eyes? With an impatient sigh, he pulled down the curtain and turned over to sleep.

His thoughts drifted, floated, were submerged in a wavering procession of pictures; he was back

in the Philippines; they had surprised the fort; how could that be when he was on guard? But they were there— He sat up in his berth. Instinctively he slipped the revolver out of his bag and held it in one hand, as he peeped through the crevice of the curtains. There was no motion, no sound of moving; but heads were emerging between the curtains in every direction; and Archie was standing, his hands shaking above his tumbled brown head and pale face. A man in a soft hat held two revolvers while another man was pounding on the drawing-room door, gruffly commanding those inside to come out. "No, we shall not come out," responded Aunt Rebecca's composed, well-bred accents, her neat enunciation not disturbed by a quiver. "If you want to kill an old woman, you will have to break down the door."

"Let them alone, Shay, it takes too long; let's finish here, first," called the man with the revolver; "they'll come soon enough when we want them. Here, young feller, fish out! Nobody'll get hurt if you keep quiet; if you don't you'll get a dose like the man in number six, two years ago. Hustle, young feller!"

The colonel was eying every motion, every

shifting from one foot to the other. Let them once get by Archie—

The boy handed over his pocket-book.

"Now your watch," commanded the brigand; "take it, Shay!"

"Won't you please let me keep that watch?" faltered Archie; "that was papa's watch."

The childish name from the tall lad made the robber laugh. "And mama's little pet wants to keep it, does he? Well, he can't. Get a move on you!"

The colonel had the sensation of an electric shock; as the second robber grabbed at the fob in the boy's belt, Archie struck him with the edge of his open hand so swiftly and so fiercely under the jaw that he reeled back against his companion. The colonel's surprise did not disturb the automatic aim of an old fighter of the plains; his revolver barked; and he sprang out, on the man he shot. "Get back in the berths, all of you," he shouted; "give me a chance to shoot!"

The voice of the porter, whose hands had been turning up the lights not quite steadily, now pealed out with camp-meeting power, "Dat's it; give de colonel a chance to do some killing!"

Both bandits were sprawling on the floor of

the aisle, one limp and moaning; but the other got one hand up to shoot; only to have Archie kick the revolver out of it, while at the same instant an unbrella handle fell with a wicked whack on the man's shoulder. The New England professor was out of his berth. He had been a baseball man in his own college days; his bat was a frail one, but he hit with a will; and a groan told of his success. Nevertheless, the fellow scrambled to his feet. Mrs. Melville was also out of her berth, thanks to which circumstance he was able to escape; as the colonel (who had grappled with the other man and prevented his rising) must needs have shot through his sister-in-law to hit the fleeing form.

"What's the matter?" demanded Mrs. Melville, while the New Englander used an expression which, no doubt, as a good church-member, he regretted, later, and the colonel thundered: "All the women back into their berths. Don't anybody shoot! You, professor, look after that fellow on the floor." He was obeyed; instinctively, the master of the hour is obeyed. The porter came forward and helped the New Englander bind the prostrate outlaw, with two silk handkerchiefs and a pair of pajamas, guard mount

Miss Smith was sitting beside Archie, holding the watch. Page 67

being supplied by three men in very startling costumes; and a kind of seraglio audience behind the curtains of the berth being enacted by all the women in the car, only excepting Aunt Rebecca and Miss Smith. Aunt Rebecca, in her admirable traveling costume of a soft gray silk wrapper, looked as undisturbed as if midnight alarms were an every-night feature of journeys. Miss Smith's black hair was loosely knotted; and her face looked pale, while her dark eyes shone. They all heard the colonel's revolver; they all saw the two men who had met him at the car door spring off the platform into the dark. The robbers had horses waiting. The colonel got one shot; he saw the man fall over his horse's neck; but the horse galloped on; and the night, beyond the little splash of light, swallowed them completely.

After the conductor and the engineer had both consulted him, and the express messenger had appeared, armed to the teeth, a little too late for the fray, but not too late for lucid argument, Winter made his way back to the car. Miss Smith was sitting beside Archie; she was holding the watch, which had played so important a part in the battle, up under the electric light to examine an inscription. The loose black sleeves of her

blouse fell back, revealing her arms; they were white and softly rounded. She looked up; and the soldier felt the sudden rush of an emotion that he had not known for years; it caught at his throat almost like an invisible hand.

"Well, Archie," he said foolishly, "good for jiu-jitsu!"

Archie flushed up to his eyes.

"Why didn't you obey orders, young man, and hold up your hands?" said Colonel Rupert Winter. "You're as bad as poor Haley, who is nearly weeping that he had no chance, but only broke away from Mrs. Haley in time to see the robbers make off."

"I—I did at first; but I got so mad I forgot," stammered Archie happily. "Afterward you were my superior officer and I had to do what you said."

All the while he chaffed the boy, he was watching for that beautiful look in Janet Smith's eyes; and wondering when he could get her off by herself to brag to her of the boy's courage. When his chance at a few words did come he chuckled: "Regular fool Winter! I knew he would act in just that absurd, reckless way." Then he caught the look he wanted; it surely was a lovely, wom-

anly look; and it meant—what in thunder *did* it mean? As he puzzled, his pulses gave the same unaccountable, smothering leap; and he felt as the boy of twenty had felt, coming back from his first battle to his first love.

CHAPTER IV

THE VANISHING OF ARCHIE

"In my opinion," said Aunt Rebecca, critically eying her new drawing-room on the train to San Francisco; "the object of our legal methods seems to be to defend the criminal. And a very efficient means to this end is to make it so uncomfortable and costly and inconvenient for any witness of a crime that he runs away rather than endure it. Here we have had to stay over so long in Salt Lake we nearly lost our drawing-room. But never mind, you got your man committed. Did you find out anything about his gang?"

The colonel shook his head. "No, he's a tough country boy; he has the rural distrust of lawyers and of sweat-boxes. He does absolutely nothing but groan and swear, pretending his wound hurts him. But I've a notion there are bigger people back of him. It's most awfully good of you, Aunt Rebecca, to stick to me this way."

"Of course, I stick to you; I'm too old to be

fickle. Did you ever know a Winter who wouldn't stand by his friends? I belong to the old régime, Bertie; we had our faults—glaring ones, I dare say—but if we condoned sin too readily, we never condoned meanness; such a trick as that upstart Keatcham is doing would have been impossible to my contemporaries. You saw the morning papers; you know he means to eat up the Midland?"

"Yes, I know," mused the colonel; "and turn Tracy, the president, down—the one who gave him his start on his bucaneering career. Tracy declines to be his tool, being, I understand, a very decent sort of man, who has always run his road for his stock-holders and not for the stock-market. A capital crime, that, in these days. So Keatcham has, somehow, by one trick or another, got enough directors since Baneleigh died to give him the control; though he couldn't get enough of the stock; and now he means to grab the road to use for himself. Poor Tracy, who loves the road as a child, they say, will have to stand by and see it turned into a Wall Street foot-ball; and the equipment run down as fast as its reputation. I think I'm sorry for Tracy. Besides, it's a bad lookout, the power of such fellows; men who are not captains of industry, not

a little bit; only inspired gamblers. Yet they are running the country. I wonder where is the class that will save us."

"I don't know. I don't admire the present century, Bertie. We had people of quality in my day; we have only people of culture in this. I confess I prefer the quality. They had robuster nerves and really asked less of people, although they may have appeared to ask more. *We* used to be contented with respect from our inferiors and courtesy from our equals—"

"And what from your betters, Aunt Rebecca?" drawled the colonel.

"We had no betters, Rupert; we were the best. I think partly it was our assurance of our position, which nobody else doubted any more than we, that kept us so mannerly. Nowadays, nobody has a real position. He may have wealth and a servile following, who expect to make something out of him, but he hasn't position. The newspapers can make fun of him. The common people watch him drive by and never think of removing their caps. Nobody takes him seriously except his toadies and himself. And as for the sentiments of reverence and loyalty, very useful sentiments in running a world, they seem to have

clean disappeared, except"—she smiled a half-reluctant smile—"except with youngsters like Archie, who would find it agreeable to be chopped into bits for *you,* and the women who have not lived in the world, like Janet, who makes a heroine out of *me*—upon my word, Bertie, *je t'ai fait rougir!*"

"Not at all," said the colonel; "an illusion of the sunset; but what do you mean when you say people of quality required less than people of culture?"

"Oh, simply this; all *we* demanded was deference; but your cultivated gang wants admiration and submission, and will not let us possess our secret souls, even, in peace. And, then, the quality despised no one, but the cultivated despise every one. Ah, well—

> 'Those good old times are past and gone,
> I sigh for them in vain,—'

Janet, I wish Archie would fish his mandolin out and you would sing to me; I like to hear the songs of my youth. Not rag-time, or coon-songs, but dear old Foster's melodies; *Old Kentucky Home,* and *Massa's in the Col,' Col' Ground,* and *Nellie Was a Lady*—what makes that so sad, I wonder?

—'Nellie was a lady, las' night she died;' it's all in that single line; I think it is because it represents the pathetic idealization of love; Nellie was that black lover's ideal of all that was lovely, and she was dead. Is the orchestra ready—and the choir? Yes, shut the door; we are for art's sake only, not for the applause of the cold world in the car."

Afterward, when he was angry over his own folly, his own blind, dogged, trustfulness against all the odds of evidence, Rupert Winter laid his weakness to that hour; to a woman's sweet, untrained, tender voice singing the simple melodies of his youth. They sang one song after another while the sun sank lower and stained the western sky. Through the snow-sheds they could catch glimpses of a wild and strange nature; austere, yet not repelling; vistas of foot-hills bathed in the evening glow; rank on rank of firs, tall, straight, beautiful, not wind-tortured and maimed, like the woeful dwarfs of Colorado; and wonderful snow-capped mountain peaks, with violet shadows and glinting streaks of silver. Snow everywhere: on the hillsides; on the close thatch of the firs; on the ice-locked rivers; snow freshly fallen, softly tinted, infinitely, awesomely pure.

Presently they came out into a lumber country where the mills huddled in the hollows, over the streams. Huge fires were blazing on the river-banks. Their tawny red glare dyed the snow for a long distance, making entrancing tints of rose and yellow; and the dark green of the pines, against this background, looked strangely fresh. And then, without warning, they plunged into the dimness of another long wooden tunnel and emerged into lovely spring. The trees were in leaf, and not alone the trees; the undulating swells of pasture land and roadside by the mountains were covered with a tender verdure; and there were innumerable vines and low glossy shrubs with faintly colored flowers.

"This is like the South," said Miss Smith.

Archie was devouring the scene. "Doesn't it just somehow make you feel as if you couldn't breathe, Miss Janet?" said he.

"Are you troubled with the high altitude?" asked Millicent anxiously; "I have prepared a little vial of spirits of ammonia; I'll fetch it for you."

The colonel had some ado to rescue Archie; but he was aided by the porter, who was now passing through the car proclaiming: "You all have

seen Dutch Flat Mr. Bret Hahte wrote 'bout; nex' station is Shady Run; and eve'ybody look and see the greates' scenic 'traction of dis or any odder railroad, Cape Hohn!"

Instantly, Mrs. Melville fished her guide-book and began to read:

" 'There are few mountain passes more famous than that known to the world as Cape Horn. The approach to it is picturesque, the north fork of the American River raging and foaming in its rocky bed, fifteen hundred feet below and parallel with the track—' "

"Do you mind, Millicent, if we look instead of listen?" Aunt Rebecca interrupted, and Mrs. Melville lapsed into an injured muteness.

Truly, Cape Horn has a poignant grandeur that strikes speech from the lips. One can not look down that sheer height to the luminous ghost of a river below, without a thrill. If to pass along the cliff is a shivering experience, what must the actual execution of that stupendous bit of engineering have been to the workmen who hewed the road out of the rock, suspended over the abyss! Their dangling black figures seem to sway still as one swings around the curve.

Our travelers sat in silence, until the "Cape"

was passed and again they could see their roadbed on the side. Then Mrs. Melville made a polite excuse for departure; she had promised a "Daughter" whom she had met at various "biennials" that she would have a little talk with her. Thus she escaped. They did not miss her. Hardly speaking, the four sat in the dimly lighted, tiny room, while mountains and fields and star-sown skies drifted by. Unconsciously, Archie drew closer to his uncle, and the older man threw an arm about the young shoulders. He looked up to meet Janet's eyes shining and sweet, in the flash of a passing station light. Mrs. Winter smiled, her wise old smile.

With the next morning came another shift of scene; they were in the fertile valleys of California. At every turn the landscape became more softly tinted, more gracious. Aunt Rebecca was in the best of humor and announced herself as having the journey of her life. The golden green of the grain fields, the towering palms, the pepper-trees with their fascinating grace, the round tops of the live-oaks, the gloss of the orange groves, the calla-lily hedges and the heliotrope and geranium trees which climbed to the second story of the stucco houses, filled her with the enthusiasm

of a child. She drank in the cries of the enterprising young liar who cried "Fresh figs," months out of season, and she ate fruit, withered in cold storage, with a trustful zest. No less than three books about the flora of California came out of her bag. A certain vine called the Bougainvillea, she was trying to find, if only the cars would not go so fast; as for poinsettias, she certainly should raise her own for Christmas. She was learned in gardens and she discoursed with Miss Smith on the different kinds of trumpet-vine, and whether the white jasmine trailing among the gaudy clusters was of the same family as that jasmine which they knew in the pine forests. But she disparaged the roses; they looked shop-worn. The colonel watched her in amazement.

"Bertie, I make you think of that little dwarf of Dickens', don't I?" she cried. "Miss Muffins, Muggins? what *was* her name? You are expecting me to exclaim, 'Ain't I volatile?' Thank Heaven, I am. I could always take an interest in trifles. It has been my salvation to cultivate an interest in trifles, Bertie; there are a great many more trifles than crises in life. Where has Janet gone? Oh, to give the porter the collodion for

his cut thumb. People with troubles, big or little, are always making straight for Janet. Bertie, have you made your mind up about her?"

"Only that she is charming," replied the colonel. He did not change color, but he was uneasily conscious that he winced, and that the shrewd old critic of life and manners perceived it. But she was mercifully blind to all appearance; she went on with the little frown of the solver of a psychological enigma. "Yes, Janet is charming; and why? She is the stillest creature. Have you noticed? Yet you never have the sense that she hasn't answered you. She's the best listener in the world; and there's one thing about her unusual in most listeners—her eyes never grow vacant."

Rupert had noticed; he called himself a doddering old donkey silently, because he had assumed that there was anything personal in the interest of those eyes when he had spoken. Of course not; it was her way with every one, even Millicent, no doubt. His aunt's next words were lost, but a sentence caught his ear directly: "For all she's so gentle, she has plenty of spirit. Bertie, did I ever tell you about the time our precious cousin threw our great-great-grandfather's gold snuff-box at her? No? It was funny. She flew

into one of her towering rages, and shrieking, 'Take *that!*' hurled the snuff-box at Janet. Janet wasn't used to having things thrown at her. She caught the box, then she rang the bell. 'Thank you very much,' says Janet; and when old Aunt Phrosie came, she handed the snuff-box to her, saying it had just been given to her as a present. But she sent it that same day to one of the sisters. There was never anything else thrown at her, I can tell you."

They found a wonderful sunset on the bay when San Francisco was reached. Still in her golden humor, as they rattled over the cobblestones of the picturesque streets to the Palace Hotel, Mrs. Winter told anecdotes of Robert Louis Stevenson, obtained from a friend who had known his mother. Mrs. Winter had chosen the Palace in preference to the St. Francis, to Mrs. Melville's high disgust.

"She thinks it more typical," sneered Millicent; "myself, I prefer cleanliness and comfort to types."

Their rooms were waiting for them and two bell-boys ushered Mrs. Winter into her suite. Randall was lodged on the same floor, and Mrs. Melville, who was to spend a few days with her

aunt on the latter's invitation, was on a lower floor. The colonel had begged to have Archie next to him; and he examined the quarters with approbation. His own room was the last of the suite; to the right hand, between his room and Archie's, was their bath; then the parlor of Mrs. Winter's suite next her room and bath, and last, to the right, Miss Smith's room.

Archie was sitting by the window looking out on the street; only the oval of his soft boyish cheek showed. The colonel went by him to the parlor beyond, where he encountered his aunt, her hands full of gay postal cards.

"*Souvenirs de voyage,*" she answered his glance; "I am going to post them."

"Can't I take them for you?"

"No, thanks, I want the exercise."

"May I go with you?"

"Indeed, no. My dear Bertie, I'm only aged, I'm not infirm."

"You will *never* be aged," responded the colonel gallantly. He turned away and walked along the arcade which looked down into the great court of the hotel. Millicent was approaching him; Millicent in something of a temper. Her room was hideously draughty and she could not get any one,

although she had rung and telephoned to the office and tried every device which was effectual in a well-conducted hotel; but this, she concluded bitterly, was not well-conducted; it was only typical.

"There's a lovely fire in Aunt Rebecca's parlor," soothed the colonel; "come in there."

Afterward it seemed to him that this whole interview with Millicent could not have occupied more than four minutes; that it was not more than seven minutes since he had seen Archie's shapely curly head against the curtain fall of the window.

But when he opened the door, Miss Smith came toward them. "Is Archie with Aunt Rebecca?" said she.

The colonel answered that he had left him in the parlor; perhaps he had stepped into his own room.

But neither in Archie's nor the colonel's nor in any room of the party could they find the boy.

CHAPTER V

BLIND CLUES

"But this is preposterous," cried Mrs. Melville, "you *must* have seen him had he come out of the room; you were directly in front of the doors all the time."

"I was," admitted the colonel; "can—can the boy be hiding to scare us?" He spoke to Miss Smith. She had grown pale; he did not know that his own color had turned. Millicent stared from one to the other.

"How ridiculous!" she exclaimed; "of course not; but he must be somewhere; let *me* look!"

Look as they might through all the staring, empty rooms, there was no vestige of the boy. He was as clean vanished as if he had fallen out of the closed and locked windows. The colonel examined them all; had there been one open, he would have peered outside, frightened as he had never been when death was at his elbow. But it certainly wasn't possible to jump through a window, and not only shut, but lock it after one.

Under every bed, in every closet, he prowled; he was searching still when Mrs. Winter returned. By this time Mrs. Melville was agitated, and, naturally, irritated as well. "I think it is unpardonable in Archie to sneak out in this fashion," she complained.

"I suppose the boy wanted to see the town a bit," observed Aunt Rebecca placidly. "Rupert, come in and sit down; he will be back in a moment; smoke a cigar, if your nerves need calming."

Rupert felt as if he were a boy of ten, called back to common sense out of imaginary horrors of the dark.

"But, if he wanted to go out, why did he leave his hat and coat behind him?" asked Miss Smith.

"He may be only exploring the hotel," said Mrs. Winter. "Don't be so restless, Bertie; sit down."

The colonel's eye was furtively photographing every article of furniture in the room; it lingered longest on Mrs. Winter's wardrobe-trunk, which was standing in her room. Randall had been despatched for a hot-water bottle in lieu of one which had sprung a leak on the train; so the trunk stood, its door ajar.

"Maybe he is doing the Genevra stunt in there —is that what you are thinking?" she jeered. "Well, go and look."

Light as her tone was, she was not unaffected by the contagion of anxiety about her; after a moment, while Rupert was looking at the wardrobe-trunk, and even profanely exploring the swathed gowns held in rigid safety by bands of rubber, she moved about the rooms herself.

"There isn't room for a mouse in that box," growled the colonel.

"Of course not," said his aunt languidly, sinking into the easiest chair; "but your mind is easier. Archie will come back for dinner; don't worry."

"How could he get by *me?*" retorted the colonel.

"Perhaps he went into one of the neighboring rooms," Miss Smith suggested. "Shall I go out and rap on the door of the next room on the left?" On the right the last room of the party was a corner room.

"Why, you *might,*" acquiesced Aunt Rebecca; but Mrs. Melville cut the ends of her words.

"Pray let me go, Aunt Rebecca," she begged, suiting the action to the words, and was out of the door almost ahead of her sentence.

The others waited; they were silent; little flecks of color raddled Mrs. Winter's cheeks. They could hear Millicent's knock reverberating. There was no answer. "Telephone to the adjacent rooms," proposed the colonel.

"I'll telephone," said Mrs. Winter, and rang up the number of the next room. There was no response; but when she called the number of the room adjoining, she seemed to get an answer, for she announced her name. "Have you seen a young lad?" she continued, after an apology for disturbing them. "He belongs to our party; has he by chance got into your room? and is he there?" In a second she put down the receiver with a heightened color, saying, "They might be a little civiler in their answers, if it *is* Mr. Keatcham's suite."

"What did the beggar say?" bristled the colonel.

"Only that it was Mr. Keatcham's suite—Mr. E. S. Keatcham—as if *that* put getting into it quite out of the question. Some underling, I presume."

"There is the unoccupied room between. That is not accounted for. But it shall be. I will find out who is in there." Rupert rose as he spoke,

pricked by the craving for action of a man accustomed to quick decision. He heard his aunt brusquely repelling Millicent's proposal of the police, as he left the room. Indeed, she called him back to exact a promise that he would not make Archie's disappearance public. "We want to find him," was her grim addendum; "and we can't have the police and the newspapers hindering us."

In the office, he found external courtesy and a rather perfunctory sympathy, based on a suppressed, but perfectly visible conviction that the boy had stolen out for a glimpse of the city, and would be back shortly.

The manager had no objection to telling Colonel Winter, whom he knew slightly, that the occupant of the next room was a New England lady of the highest respectability, Mrs. Winthrop Wigglesworth. If the young fellow didn't turn up for dinner, he should be glad to ask Mrs. Wigglesworth to let Mrs. Winter examine her room; but he rather thought they would be seeing young Winter before then—oh, his hat? They usually carried caps in their pockets; and as to coats—boys never thought of their coats.

The manager's cheeriness did not especially uplift the colonel. He warmed it over dutifully,

however, for his womankind's benefit. Miss Smith had gone out; why, he was not told, and did not venture to ask. Mrs. Melville kept making cautious signals to him behind his aunt's back; otherwise she was preserving the mien of sympathetic solemnity which she was used to show at funerals and first visits of condolence and congratulation to divorced friends. Mrs. Winter, as usual, wore an inscrutable composure. She was still firmly opposed to calling in the aid of the police.

Did she object to his making a few inquiries among the hotel bell-boys, the elevator boy and the people in the restaurant or in the office?

Not at all, if he would be cautious.

So he sallied out, and, in the midst of his fruitless inquisition, Millicent appeared.

Forcing a civil smile, he awaited her pleasure. "Go on, don't mind me," said she mournfully; "you will feel better to have done everything in your power."

"But I shall not discover anything?"

"I fear not. Has it not occurred to you that he has been kidnapped?"

"Hmn!" said the colonel.

"And did you notice how perturbed Miss Smith

seemed? She was quite pale; her agitation was quite noticeable."

"She is tremendously fond of Archie."

"Or—she knows more than she will say."

"Oh, what rot!" sputtered the colonel; then he begged her pardon.

"Wait," he counseled, and his man's resistance to appearances had its effect, as masculine immobility always has, on the feminine effervescence before him. "Wait," was his word, "at least until we give the boy a chance to turn up; if he has slipped by us, he is taking a little *pasear* on his own account; lads do get restless sometimes if they are held too steadily in the leash, especially—if you will excuse me—by, well, by ladies."

"If he has frightened us out of our wits—well, I don't know what oughtn't to be done to him!"

"Oh well, let us wait and hear *his* story," repeated the soldier.

But the last streaks of red faded out of the west; a chill fog smoked up from the darkening hills, and Archie had not come. At eight, Mrs. Winter ordered dinner to be served in their rooms. Miss Smith had not returned. The colonel attempted a military cheerfulness, which his aunt told him bluntly, later in the evening, re-

minded her of a physician's manner in critical cases where the patient's mind must be kept absolutely quiet.

But she ate more than he at dinner; although her own record was not a very good one. Millicent avowed that she was too worried to eat, but she was tempted by the strawberries and carp, and wondered were the California fowls really so poor; and gave the sample the benefit of impartial and fair examination, in the end making a very fair meal.

It is not to be supposed that Winter had been idle; before dinner he had put a guard in the hall and had seen Haley, who reported that his wife and child had gone to a kinswoman in Santa Barbara.

"Sure the woman has a fine house intirely, and she's fair crazy over the baby that's named afther her, for she's a widdy woman with never a child excipt wan that's in hivin, a little gurrl; and she wudn't let us rist 'til she'd got the cratur'. Nor I wasn't objictin', for I'm thinking there'll be something doin' and the wimin is onconvanient, thim times."

The colonel admitted that he shared Haley's opinion. He questioned the man minutely about

Mercer's conduct on the train. It was absolutely commonplace. If he had any connection (as the colonel had suspected) with the bandits, he made no sign. He sent no telegrams; he wrote no letters; he made no acquaintances, smoking his solitary cigar over a newspaper. Indeed, absolutely the only matter of note (if that were one) was that he read so many newspapers—buying every different journal vended. At San Francisco he got into a cab and Haley heard him give the order: "To the St. Francis." Having his wife and child with him, the sergeant couldn't follow; but he went around to the St. Francis later, and inquired for Mr. Mercer, for whom he had a letter (as was indeed the case—the colonel having provided him with one), but no such name appeared on the register. Invited to leave the letter to await the gentleman's arrival, Haley said that he was instructed to give it to the gentleman himself; therefore, he took it away with him. He had carried it to all the other hotels or boarding-places in San Francisco which he could find, aided greatly thereto by a friend of his, formerly in "the old —th," a sergeant, now stationed at the Presidio. Thanks to him, Haley could say definitely that Mercer was not at any of the hotels

or more prominent boarding-houses in the city, at least under his own name.

"And you haven't seen him since he got into the cab at the station?" the colonel summed up.

Haley's reply was unexpected: "Yes, sor, I seen him this day, in the marning, in this same hotel."

"Where?"

"Drinking coffee at a table in th' coort. He wint out, havin' paid the man, not a-signin', an' he guv the waiter enough to make him say, 'Thank ye, sor,' but not enough to make him smile and stay round to pull aff the chair. I follied him to the dure, but he got into an autymobile—"

"Get the number?"

"Yis, sor. Number—here 'tis, sor, I wrote it down to make sure." He passed over to the colonel an old envelope on which was written a number.

* "M. 20139," read the colonel, carefully noting down the number in his own memorandum-book. And he reflected, "That is a Massachusetts number—humph!"

Haley's information ended there. He heard of

*Of course, no allusions are made to any real M. 20139.

Archie's disappearance with his usual stolid mien, but his hands slowly clenched. The colonel continued:

"You are to find out, if you can, by scraping acquaintance with the carriage men, if that auto —you have written a description, I see, as well as the number—find out if that auto left this hotel this afternoon between six and seven o'clock. Find out who were in it. Find out where it is kept and who owns it. Get H. Birdsall, Merchants' Exchange Building, to send a man to help you. Wait, I've a card ready for you to give him from me; he has sent me men before. Report by telephone as soon as you know anything. If I'm not here, speak Spanish and have them write it down. Be back here to-night by ten, if you can, yourself."

Haley dismissed, and his own appetite for dinner effectually dispelled by his report, Winter joined his aunt. Should he tell her his suspicions and their ground? Wasn't he morally obliged, now, to tell her? She was co-guardian with him of the boy, who, he had no doubt, had been spirited away by Mercer and his accomplice; and hadn't she a right to any information on the matter in his possession?

Reluctantly he admitted that she did have such a right; and, he admitted further, being a man who never cheated at solitaire, that his object in keeping the talk of the two men from her had not been so much the desire to guard her nerves (which he knew perfectly well were of a robuster fiber than those of most women twenty or forty years younger than she); no, he admitted it grimly, he had not so much spared his aunt as Janet Smith; he could not bear to direct suspicion toward her. But how could he keep silent longer? Kicking this question about in his mind, he spoiled the flavor of his after-dinner cigar, although his aunt graciously bade him smoke it in her parlor.

And still Miss Smith had not returned; really, it was only fair to her to have her present when he told his story to his aunt; no, he was *not* grabbing at any excuse for delay; if he could watch that girl's face while he told his story he would —well, he would have his mind settled one way or another.

Here the telephone bell rang; the manager informed Colonel Winter that Mrs. Wigglesworth had returned.

"Wigglesworth? what an extraordinary name!"

cried Millicent when the colonel shared his information.

"Good old New England name; I know some extremely nice Wigglesworths in Boston," Mrs. Winter amended with a touch of hauteur; and, at this moment, there came a knock at the door.

There is all the difference in the world between knocks; a knock as often as not conveys a most unintentional hint in regard to the character of the one behind the knuckles; and often, also, the mood of the knocker is reflected in the sound which he makes. Were there truth in this, one would judge that the person who knocked at this moment must be a woman, for the knock was not loud, but almost timidly gentle; one might even guess that she was agitated, for the tapping was in a hurried, uneven measure.

"I believe it is Mrs. Wigglesworth herself," declared Aunt Rebecca. "Bertie, I'm going into the other room; she will talk more freely to you. She would want to spare my nerves. That is the nuisance of being old. Now open the door."

She was half-way across the threshold before she finished, and the colonel's fingers on the door-knob waited only for the closing of her door to turn to admit the lady in waiting.

A lady she was beyond doubt, and any one who had traveled would have been sure that she was a lady from Massachusetts. She wore that little close bonnet which certain elderly Boston gentlewomen can neither be driven nor allured to abandon; her rich and quiet black silken gown might have been made any year within the last five, and her furs would have graced a princess. She had beautiful gray hair and a soft complexion and wore glasses. Equally evident to the observer was the fact of her suppressed agitation.

She waved aside the colonel's proffered chair, introducing herself in a musical, almost tremulous voice with the crisp enunciation of her section of the country. "I am Mrs. Wigglesworth; I understand, Colonel Winter—you?—y-yes, no, thank you, I will not sit. I—I understood Mrs. Winter —ah, your aunt, is an elderly woman."

"This is my sister-in-law, Mrs. Melville Winter," explained the colonel. "My aunt is elderly in years, but in nothing else."

Mrs. Wigglesworth smiled a faint smile; the colonel could see a tremble of the hand that was unconsciously drawing her fur collar more tightly about her throat. "How very nice—yes, to be sure," she faltered. "But you will understand that

I did not wish to alarm her. I heard that you wanted to speak to me, and that the little boy was lost."

"Or stolen," Mrs. Melville said crisply.

The colonel, in a few words, displayed the situation. He had prevailed upon his visitor to sit down, and while he spoke he noticed that her hands held each other tightly, although she appeared perfectly composed and did not interrupt. She answered his questions directly and quietly. She had been away taking tea with a friend; she had remained to dine. Her maid had gone out earlier to spend the day and night with a sister in the city; so the room was empty between six and seven o'clock.

"The chambermaid wasn't there, then?"

"I don't think so. She usually does the room and brings the towels for the bath in the morning. But I asked her, to make sure, and she says that she was not there since morning. She seems a good girl; I think she didn't—but I have found something. At least I am af—I may have found something. I thought I might see Mrs. Winter's niece about it"—she glanced toward Millicent, who said, "Certainly," at a venture; and looked frightened.

"And you found—?" said the colonel.

"Only this. I went to my rooms, turned on the light and was taking off my gloves before I untied my bonnet. One of my rings fell on the floor. It went under a rug, and I at once remarked that it was a different place for the rug to the one where it had been before. Before, it was in front of the dresser, a very natural place, but now it is on the carpet to one side, a place where there seemed no reason for its presence. These details seem trivial, but—"

"I can see they are not," said the colonel. "Pray proceed, Madam. The ring had rolled under the rug!"

Mrs. Wigglesworth gave him a grateful nod.

"Yes, it had. And when I removed the rug I saw it; but as I bent to pick it up I saw something else. In one place there was a stain, as large as the palm of my hand, a little pool of—it looks like blood."

Mrs. Melville uttered an exclamation of horror.

The colonel's face stiffened; but there was no change in his polite attention.

"May we be permitted to see this—ah, stain?" said he.

The three stepped through the corridor to the

outside door, and went into the chamber. The rug was flung to one side, and there on the gray velvet nap of the carpet was an irregular, sprawling stain about which were spattered other stains, some crimson, some almost black.

Millicent recoiled, shuddering. The colonel knelt down and examined the stains. "Yes," he said very quietly, "you are right, it is blood."

There was a tap on the door, which was opened immediately without waiting for a permission. Millicent, rigid with fright, could only stare helplessly at the erect figure, the composed, pale face and the brilliant, imperious eyes of her aunt.

"What did you say, Bertie?" said Rebecca Winter. "I think I have a right to the whole truth."

CHAPTER VI

THE VOICE IN THE TELEPHONE

"Well, Bertie?" Mrs. Winter had gone back to her parlor in the most docile manner in the world. Her submission struck Rupert on the heart; it was as if she were stunned, he felt.

He was sitting opposite her, his slender, rather short figure looking shrunken in the huge, ugly, upholstered easy-chair; he kept an almost constrained attitude of military erectness, of which he was conscious, himself; and at which he smiled forlornly, recalling the same pose in Haley whenever the sergeant was disconcerted.

"But, first," pursued his aunt, "who was that red-headed bell-boy with whom you exchanged signals in the hall?"

The colonel suppressed a whistle. "Aunt Becky, you're a wonder! Did you notice? And he simply shut the palm of his hand! Why, it's this way: I was convinced that Archie must be on the premises; he *couldn't* get off. So I tele-

phoned a detective that I know here, a private agency, *not* the police, to send me a sure man to watch. He is made up as a bell-boy (with the hotel manager's consent, of course); either I, or Millicent, or that boy has kept an eye on the Keatcham doors and the next room ever since I found Archie was gone. No one has gone out without our seeing him. If any suspicious person goes out, we have it arranged to detain him long enough for me to get a good look. I can tell you exactly who left the room."

"It is you who are the wonder, Bertie," said Aunt Rebecca, a little wearily, but smiling. "Who has gone out?"

"At seven Mr. Keatcham's secretary went down to the office and ordered dinner, very carefully. I didn't see him, but my sleuth did. He had the secretary and the valet of the Keatcham party pointed out to him; he saw them. They had one visitor, young Arnold, *the* Arnold's son—"

"The one who has all the orange groves and railways? Yes, I knew his father."

"That one; he only came a few moments since. Mr. Keatcham and his secretary dined together, and Keatcham's own man waited on them; but the waiter for this floor brought up the dishes. At

nine the dishes were brought out and my man helped Keatcham's valet to pile them a little farther down the corridor in the hall."

These items the colonel was reading out of his little red book.

"You have put all that down. Do you think it means anything?"

"I have put everything down. One can't weed until there is a crop of information, you know."

"True," murmured Aunt Rebecca, nodding her head thoughtfully. "Well, did anything else happen?"

"The secretary posted a lot of letters in the shute. They are all smoking now. Yes—" he was on his feet and at the door in almost a single motion. There had been just the slightest tattoo on the panel. When the door was opened the colonel could hear the rattle of the elevator. He was too late to catch it, but he could see the inmates. Three gentlemen stood in the car. One was Keatcham, the other two had their backs to Winter. One seemed to be supporting Keatcham, who looked pale. He saw the colonel and darted at him a single glance in which was something like a poignant appeal; what, it was too brief for the receiver to decide, for in the space of an eye-

blink a shoulder of the other man intervened, and simultaneously the elevator car began to sink.

There was need to decide instantly who should follow, who stay on guard. Rupert bade the boy go down by the stairs, while, with a kind of bull-dog instinct, he clung to the rooms. The lad was to fetch the manager and the keys of the Keatcham suite.

Meanwhile Rupert paced back and forth before the closed doors, whence there penetrated the rustle of packing and a murmur of voices. Presently Keatcham's valet opened the farther door. He spoke to some one inside. "Yes, sir," he said, "the porter hought to be 'ere now."

The porter was there; at least he was coming down the corridor which led to the elevator, trundling his truck before him. He entered the rooms and busied himself about the luggage.

Doggedly the colonel stuck to his guard until the valet and another man, a clean-shaven, fresh-faced young man whom the watcher had never seen before, came out of the room. The valet superintended the taking of two trunks, accepting tickets and checks from the porter with a thoroughly Anglican suspicion and thoroughness of

inspection, while the young man stood tapping his immaculate trousers-leg with the stick of his admirably slender umbrella.

"It's all right, Colvin," he broke in impatiently; "three tickets to Los Angeles, drawing-room, one lower berth, one section, checks for two trunks; come on!"

Very methodically the man called Colvin stowed away his green and red slips, first in an envelope, then in his pocket-book, finally buttoning an inside pocket over all. He was the image of a rather stupid, conscientious English serving creature. Carefully he counted out a liberal but not lavish tip for the porter, and watched that functionary depart. Last of all, he locked the door.

With extreme courtesy of manner Winter approached the young man.

"Pardon me," said he. "I am Colonel Winter; my aunt, Mrs. Winter, has the rooms near yours, and she finds that she needs another room or two. Are you leaving yours?"

"These are Mr. Keatcham's rooms, not mine," the young man responded politely. "*He* is leaving them."

"When you give up your keys, would you mind

asking the clerk to send them up to me?" pursued the colonel. "Room three twenty-seven."

"Certainly," replied the young man, "or would you like to look at them a moment now?"

"Why—if it wouldn't detain you," hesitated Winter; he was hardly prepared for the offer of admittance.

"Get the elevator and hold it a minute, Colvin," said the young man, and he instantly fitted the key to the door, which he flung open.

"Excuse me," said he, as they stood in the room, "but aren't you the Colonel Winter who held that mountain pass to let the other fellows get off, after your ammunition was exhausted?"

"I seem to recall some such episode, only it sounds rather gaudy the way you put it."

"I read about you in the papers; you swam a river with Funston; did all kinds of stunts—"

"Or the newspaper reporter did. You don't happen to know anything about the price of these rooms, I suppose?"

The young man did not know, but he showed the colonel through all the rooms with vast civility. He seemed quite indifferent to the colonel's interest in closets, baths and wardrobes; he only wanted to talk about the Philippines.

The colonel, who always shied like a mettled horse from the flutter of his own laurels, grew red with discomfort and rattled the door-knobs.

"There the suite ends," said the young man.

"Oh, we don't want it all, only a room or two," Colonel Winter demurred. "Any one of these rooms would do. Well, I will not detain you. The elevator boy will be tired, and Mr. Keatcham will grow impatient."

"Not at all; he will have gone. I—I'm so very glad to have met you, Colonel—"

In this manner, with mutual civilities, they parted, the young man escorting the colonel to his own door, which the latter was forced to enter by the sheer demands of the situation.

But hardly had the door closed than he popped out again. The young man was swinging round the corner next the elevator.

"Is he an innocent bystander or what?" puzzled the soldier. He resumed his march up and down the corridor. The next room to the Keatcham suite was evidently held by an agent of the Fireless Cooking Stove, since one of his samples had strayed into the hall and was mutely proclaiming its own exceeding worth in very black letters on a very white placard.

"If the young man and the valet are straight goods, the key will come up reasonably soon from the office," thought the watcher.

Sure enough, the keys, in the hands of Winter's own spy, appeared before he had waited three minutes. He reported that the old gentleman got into a cab with his secretary and the valet, and the other gentlemen took another cab. The secretary paid the bill. Had he gone sooner than expected? No; he had engaged the rooms until Thursday night; this was Thursday night.

The colonel asked about the next room, which was directly on the cross corridor leading to the elevator. The detective had been instructed to watch it. How long had the Fireless Cooking Stove man had it? There was no meat for suspicion in the answer. The stove man had come the day before the Keatcham party. He was a perfectly commonplace, good-looking young man, representing the Peerless Fireless Cooking Stove with much picturesque eloquence; he had sold a lot of stoves to people in the hotel, and he tried without much success to tackle "old Keatcham"; he had attacked even the sleuth himself. "He gave me a mighty good cigar, too," chuckled the red-headed one.

"Hmn, you got it now?"

"Only the memory," the boy grinned.

"You ought to have kept it, Birdsall would tell you; you are watching every one in these rooms. Did it have a necktie? And did you throw that away?"

"No, sir, I kept that; after I got to smoking, I just thought I'd keep it."

When he took the tiny scrap of paper from his pocket-book the colonel eyed it grimly. "'*A de Villar y Villar,*'" he read, with a slight ironic inflection. "Decidedly our young Fireless Stove promoter smokes good cigars!"

"Maybe Mr. Keatcham gave it to him. He was in there."

"Was he? Oh, yes, trying to sell his stove—but not succeeding?"

"He said he was trying to get past the valet and the secretary; he thought if he could only get at the old man and demonstrate his stove he could make the sale. He could cook all right, that feller."

The colonel made no comment, and presently betook himself to his aunt. She was waiting for him in the parlor, playing solitaire. Through the open door the white bed that ought to have been

Archie's was gleaming faintly. The colonel's brows met.

"Well, Bertie? Did you find anything?" Mrs. Winter inquired smoothly.

"I'm afraid not; but here is the report." He gave it to her, even down to the cigar wrapper.

"It doesn't seem likely that Mr. Keatcham has anything to do with it," said she. "He, no doubt, has stolen many a little railway, but a little boy is too small game."

"Oh, I don't suspect Keatcham; but I wish I had caught the elevator to-night. He looked at me in a mighty queer way."

"Did you recognize his secretary as any one whom you ever saw before?" asked Mrs. Winter.

"I can't say," was the answer, given with a little hesitation. "I'm not sure."

"I don't think I quite understand you, Bertie; better make a clean breast of all you know. I'm getting a little worried myself."

The colonel reached across the cards and tapped his aunt's arm affectionately. He felt the warmest impulse toward sympathy for her that he had ever known; it glistened in his eyes. Mrs. Winter's cheeks slowly crimsoned; she turned her head, exclaiming, did she hear a noise; but the

colonel's keen ears had not been warned. "Poor woman," he thought, "she is worried to death, but she will not admit it."

"Now, Bertie," said Mrs. Winter calmly, but her elbow fell on her cards and spoiled a very promising game of Penelope's Web, "now, Bertie, *what* are you keeping back?"

Then, at last, the colonel told her of his experience in Chicago. She heard him quite without comment, and he could detect no shift of emotion in her demeanor of absorbed but perfectly calm attention, unless a certain tension of attitude and feature (as if, he phrased it, she were "holding herself in") might be so considered. And he was not sure of this. When he came to the words which stuck in his throat, the sentence about Miss Smith, she smiled frankly, almost laughed.

At the end of the recital—and the colonel had not omitted a word or a look in his memory—she merely said: "Then you think Cary Mercer has kidnapped Archie, and the nice-looking Harvard boy is helping him?"

"Don't you think it looks that way, yourself?"

She answered that question by another one: "But you don't think, do you, that Janet is the Miss Smith mentioned?"

His reply came after an almost imperceptible hesitation: "No!"

Again she smiled. "That is because you know Janet; if you didn't know her you would think the chances were in favor of their meaning her? Naturally! Well, I know Cary a little. I knew his father *well*. I don't believe he would harm a hair of Archie's head. He isn't a cruel fellow—at least not toward women and children. I've a notion that what he calls his wrongs have upset his wits a bit, and he might turn the screws on the Wall Street crowd that ruined him. That is, if he had a chance; but he is poor; he would need millions to get even a chance for a blow at them. But a child, a lad who looks like his brother—no, you may be sure he wouldn't hurt Archie! He *couldn't*."

"But—the name, Winter; it is not such a common name; and the words about a lady of—of—" The polite soldier hesitated.

"An old woman, do you mean?" said Aunt Rebecca, with a little curving of her still unwrinkled upper lip.

"It sounds so complete," submitted her nephew.

"Therefore distrust it," she argued dryly. "Gaboriau's great detective and Conan Doyle's

both have that same maxim—not to pick out easy answers."

Winter smiled in his own turn. "Still, sometimes the easy answers are right. Now, here is the situation: I hear this conversation at the depot. I find one of the men on the same train with me. He, presumably, if he *is* Cary Mercer, and I don't think I can be mistaken in his identity—"

"Unless another man is making up as Cary!"

"It may seem conceited, but I don't think I could be fooled. This man had every expression of the other's, and I was too struck by the—I may almost call it malignant—look he had, not to recognize him. No, it *was* Mercer; he would certainly recognize you, and he would know who I am; he would not be called upon to snub me as a possible confidence man."

"That rankles yet, Bertie?"

He made a grimace and nodded.

"But," he insisted, "isn't it so? If he is up to some mischief, any mischief—doesn't care to have his kin meet him—that is the way he would act, don't you think?"

"He might be up to mischief, yet have no designs on his kin."

"He might," said the colonel musingly. A thought which he did not confide to the shrewd old woman had just flipped his mind. But he went on with his plea.

"He avoids you; he avoids me. He is seen going into Keatcham's drawing-room; that means some sort of an acquaintance with Keatcham, enough to talk to him, anyway. How much, I can't say. Then comes the attack by the robbers; he is in another car, so there is no call for him to do anything; there is no light whatever on whether he had anything to do with the robbery.

"Then we come here. Keatcham has the room next but one. Archie goes into his own room; we see him go; I am outside, directly outside; it is simply impossible for him to go out into the hall without my seeing him; besides, I found the doors outside all locked except the one to the right where we entered your suite; then we may assume that he could not go out. He could not climb out of locked windows on the third floor down a sheer descent of some forty or fifty feet. Your last room to the right, Miss Smith's bedroom, is a corner room; besides, she was in it; that excludes every exit except that to the left. We find Mrs. Wigglesworth was absent, and there were evi-

dences of—an—an attack of some kind carefully hidden, afterward. But there is no sign of the boy. I watch the rooms. If he is hidden somewhere in Keatcham's rooms, the chances are, after Keatcham goes, they will try to take him off. I don't think it probable that Keatcham knows anything about the kidnapping; in fact, it is wildly *im*probable. Well, Keatcham goes; immediately I get into the room. The valet and the young man visiting Keatcham, young Arnold, let me in without the slightest demur. Either they know nothing of the boy or somehow they have got him away, else they would not let me in so easily. Maybe they are ignorant and the boy is gone, both. We go to the rooms very soon after; there is not the smallest trace of Archie."

"How did he get out?"

"They must have outwitted me, somehow," the colonel sighed, "and it looks as if he went voluntarily; there was no possible carrying away by force. And there was no odor of chloroform about; that is very penetrating; it would get into the halls. They must have persuaded him to go—but how?"

"If they have kidnapped him," said Mrs. Winter, "they will send me some word, and if they

have persuaded him to run away, plainly he must be able to walk, and that—mess in Mrs. Wigglesworth's room doesn't mean anything bad."

"Of course not," said the colonel firmly.

Then, in as casual a tone as he could command: "By the way, where is Miss Smith? She is back, isn't she?"

"Oh, a long time ago," said Mrs. Winter. "I sent her to bed."

"I've been frank with you. You will reciprocate and tell me why, for what, you sent her out?"

Mrs. Winter made not the least evasion. She answered frankly: "I sent her with a carefully worded advertisement—but you needn't tell Millicent, who has also gone to bed, thank Heaven—I sent her with a carefully worded advertisement to all the papers. This is the advertisement. It will reach the kidnappers, and it will not reach any one else. See." She handed him a slip of paper from her card-case. He read:

"To the holders of Archie W: Communicate with R. S. W., same address as before, and you will hear of something to your advantage. Perfectly safe."

The colonel read it thoughtfully, a little puzzled. Before he had time to speak, his quick ears

caught the sharp ring of his room telephone bell. He excused himself to answer it. His room was the last of the suite, but he shut the door on his way to the telephone.

He expected Haley; nor was he disappointed. Haley reported—in Spanish—that he had traced the automobile; it was the property of young Mr. Arnold, son of the rich Mr. Arnold. Young Arnold had been at Harvard last year, and he took out a Massachusetts license; he had a California one, too. Should he (Haley) look up young Arnold? And should he come to report that night?

The colonel thought he could wait till morning, and, a little comforted, hung up the receiver. Barely was it out of his hand when the bell shrilled again, sharply, vehemently. Winter put the tube to his ear.

"Does any one want Colonel Winter, Palace Hotel?" he asked.

A sweet, eager, boyish voice called back: "Uncle Bertie! Uncle Bertie, don't you worry; I'm all right!"

"Archie!" cried the colonel. *"Where are you?"*

But there was no answer. He called again, and a second time; he told the lad that they were dreadfully anxious about him. He got no re-

sponse from the boy; but another voice, a woman's voice, said, with cold distinctness, as if to some one in the room: "No, don't let him; it is impossible!" Then a dead wall of silence and Central's impassive ignorance. He could get nothing.

Rupert Winter stood a moment, frowning and thinking deeply. Directly, with a shrug of the shoulders, he walked out of his own outside door, locking it, and went straight to Miss Smith's.

He knocked, at first very gently, then more vigorously. But there was no answer. He went away from the door, but he did not reënter his room. He did not bear to his aunt the news which, with all its meagerness and irritating incompleteness, had been an enormous relief to him. He simply waited in the corridor. Five minutes, ten minutes passed; then he heard the elevator whir, and, standing with his hand on the knob of his open door, he saw his aunt's companion, dressed for the street, step out and speed down the corridor to her own door.

The other voice---the woman's voice—had been Janet Smith's.

CHAPTER VII

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

A mud-splashed automobile runabout containing two men was turning off Van Ness Avenue down a narrower and shadier side street in the afternoon of the Sunday following the disappearance of Archie Winter. One of the occupants seemed to be an invalid whom the brilliant March sunshine had not tempted out of his heavy wrappings and cap; the other was a short, thick-set, corduroy-jacketed chauffeur. One marked the runabout at a glance as a hardly used livery motor-car; but a moment's inspection might have shown that it was running with admirable smoothness and quiet. The chauffeur wore goggles, hence his eyes were shielded, but he turned a broad smile upon the pallid cheeks and sharpened profile beside him.

"Colonel, as a health-seeker who can't keep warm enough, you're great!" he cried. "Lord, but you look the part!"

"If I can't shed some of these confounded mufflers soon," growled the pale sufferer addressed, "I'll get so red with heat it will come through my beautiful powder. I hope those fellows won't see us, for they will be on to us, all right."

"Our own mothers wouldn't be on to us in these rigs," the chauffeur replied cheerily; he seemed to be in a hopeful mood; "and let us once get into the house, and surprise 'em, and there'll be something drop. But I haven't really had a chance to tell you the latest—having to pick you up at a drug store this way. Now, let's sum things up! You think the boy got out through Keatcham's apartment? Or Mrs. Wigglesworth's?"

"How else?" said the colonel, "he can't fly, and if he could, he couldn't fly out and then lock the windows from the inside."

"I see"—the chauffeur appeared thoughtful—"and the Wigglesworth door was locked. You think that Keatcham is in it, someway?"

"Not Keatcham," said the colonel. "There was another man in the car—Atkins they called him, though he has disappeared. But Mercer remains. His secretary and that valet of his; I think the secretary is Cary Mercer. The boy

might have slipped out in those few moments we were hunting for him inside. Afterward, either Mrs. Melville Winter or I was on guard until your man came. He might go to the Fireless Stove man, slip out of his rooms, and round the corner to the elevator in a couple of seconds. Then, of course, I might see their rooms—"

"Provided, that is, the Fireless Stove drummer is in the plot, too."

"The Fireless Stove drummer who smokes *Villar y Villar* cigars? He *is* in it, I think, Birdsall."

"Well, I'll assume that. Next thing: you get the telephone call. And you say the voice sounded chipper; didn't look like he was being hurt or bothered anyway, did it?"

"Not at all. Besides, you know the letter Miss Smith got this morning?"

"I think I'd like another peek at that; will you drive her a minute, while I look at the letter again?" The instant his hands were free Birdsall pulled out the envelope from his leather-rimmed pocket.

It was rectangular in shape and smaller than the ordinary business envelope. The paper was linen of a common diamond pattern, having no engraved heading. The detective ran his eyes

down the few lines written in an unformed boyish hand. There was neither date nor place; only these words:

DEAR MISS JANET—Don't you or auntie be woried about me because I am well and safe and having a good time. I had the nose bleed that is why I spoted the carpet. Tell Auntie to please pay for it out of my next week's allowance. Be sure and don't wory.

Your aff. friend,

ARCHIBALD PAGE WINTER.

"You're sure this is the boy's writing?" was the detective's comment.

"Sure. And his spelling, too."

"Now," said Birdsall, watching the colonel's keen, aquiline profile as he spoke, "now you notice there's no heading or mark on the paper; and the water-mark is only O. K. E., Mass., 1904. And that amounts to nothing; those folks sell all over the country. But you notice that it is not the ordinary business paper; it looks rather lady-like than commercial, doesn't it?"

The colonel admitted that it did look so.

"Now, assuming that this letter was sent with the connivance of the kidnappers, it looks as if our young gentleman wasn't in any particular danger of having a hard time. To me, it looks

pretty certain he must have skipped himself; tolled along someway, maybe, but not making any resistance. Now, is there anybody that you know who has enough influence over him for that? How about the lady's maid?"

"Randall has been a faithful servant for twenty years, a middle-aged, serious-minded, decent woman. Out of the question."

"This Miss Smith, your aunt's companion, who is she? Do you know?"

"A South Carolinian; good family; she has lived with my aunt as secretary and companion for a year; my aunt is very fond of her."

"That all you know? Well *I* have found out a little more; she used to live with a Mrs. James S. Hastings, a rich Washington woman. The lady's only son fell in love with her; *somehow* the marriage was broken off."

"What was his name?"

"Lawrence. They call him Larry. He went to Manila. Maybe you've met him there."

"Yes, I knew him; I don't believe he ever was accepted by her."

"I don't know. I have only had two days on her biography. Later, she went to Johns Hopkins Hospital. One of the doctors was very attentive

to her—but it did not come to anything. She didn't graduate. Don't know why. Then she went to live with Miss Angela Nelson, who died and left her money, away from her own family. There was talk of breaking the will; but it wasn't done. Then she came to Mrs. Winter."

The colonel was silent; there was nothing discreditable in these details. He had known before that Janet Smith was poor; that she had been thrown on the world early; that she must earn her own livelihood; yet, somehow, as Birdsall marshaled the facts, there was an insidious, malarious hint of the adventuress, bandied from place to place, hawking her attractions about, wheedling, charming for hire, entrapping imbecile young cubs—Larry Hastings wasn't more than twenty-two—somehow he felt a revolt against the picture and against the man submitting it—and, confound Millicent!

The detective changed the manner of his questions a little. "I suppose your aunt is pretty advanced in years, though she is as well preserved an old lady as I have ever met, and as shrewd. Say, wouldn't she be likely to leave the boy a lot of money?"

"I dare say." The colonel was conscious of an

intemperate impulse to kick Birdsall, who had been such a useful fellow in the Philippines.

"If anything was to happen to him, who would get the money?"

"Well, Mrs. Melville and I are next of kin," returned the colonel dryly. "Do you suspect *us?*"

"I did look up Mrs. Melville," answered the unabashed detective, "but I guess she's straight goods all right. But say, how about Miss Smith?"

The colonel stared, then he laughed. "Birdsall," said he, "there's somewhat too much mention of ladies' names to suit my Virginian taste. But if you mean to imply that Miss Smith is going to kill Archie to get my aunt's money, I can tell you you are *'way off!* Your imagination is too active for your profession. You ought to hire out to the yellow journals."

His employer's satire did not even flick the dust off Birdsall's complacency; he grinned cheerfully. "Oh, I'm not so bad as *that;* I don't suppose she did kill the boy; I think he's alive, all right. But say, Colonel, I'll give it to you straight; I do think the señora coaxed the boy off. You admit, don't you, he went off. Well, then he was coaxed, somehow. Now, who's got influence enough to coax him? You cross out the maid;

so do I. You cross out Mrs. Melville Winter; so do I. I guess we both cross out the old lady. Well, there's you and the señora left. I don't suspect *you,* General."

"Really? I don't see why. I stand to make more than anybody else, if you are digging up motives. And how about the chambermaid?"

Birdsall flashed a glance of reproach on his companion. "Now, Colonel, do you think I ain't looked *her* up? First thing. Nothing in it. Decent Vermont girl, three years in the hotel. Came for her lungs. She ain't in it. But let's get back to Miss Smith. Did you know she is Cary Mercer's sister-in-law?"

He delivered his shot in a casual way, and the colonel took it stonily; nevertheless, it went to the mark. Birdsall continued. "Now, question is, *was* Mercer the secretary? You didn't see the man in the elevator, except his back. Had he two moles?"

"I couldn't see. He had different clothes; but still there was something like Mercer about the shoulders."

"Burney didn't get a chance to take a snapshot, but he did snap the stove man. Here it is. Pull that book out of my pocket."

Obeying, the colonel lifted a couple of small prints which he scrutinized intently, at the end, admitting, "Yes, it is he all right. Now do you know what *I* think?"

Birdsall couldn't form an idea.

"I think the Keatcham party is in it; and I think they are after bigger game than Archie. Maybe the train-robbers were a part of the scheme—although I'm not so sure of that."

"Oh, the robbers were in it all right. But now come to Miss Smith; where does she come in? Or are you as sure of her as Mercer was in Chicago?"

If he had expected to get a spark out of the Winter tinder by this scraping stroke, he was mistaken; the soldier did not even move his brooding gaze fixed on the hills beyond the house roofs; and he answered in a level tone: "Did you get *that* story from my aunt, or was it Mrs. Melville? I'm pretty certain you got your biography from that quarter. My aunt might have told her."

"That would be betraying a lady's confidence. I'm only a detective, whose business is to pry, but I never go back on the ladies. And I think, same's you, that the lady in question is a real nice, high-toned lady; but I can't disregard the

evidence. I never give out my system, but I've got one, all the same. Look here, see this paper?" —he had replaced the envelope in his pocket; he pulled it out again; or rather, so the colonel fancied, until Birdsall turned the envelope over, revealing it to be blank. "There's a sheet of paper inside; take it out. Look at the water-mark, look at the pattern; then compare it with this letter"—handing the colonel the original envelope. "Same exactly, ain't they?"

The colonel, who had studied the two sheets of paper silently, nodded as silently; and he had a premonition of Birdsall's next sentence before it came. "Well, Mrs. Melville Winter, this morning, took me to Miss Smith's desk, where we found this and a lot more like it."

"You seem to be right in thinking the paper widely distributed," observed the colonel.

"And you don't think that suspicious?"

"I should think it more suspicious if the paper were not out on her desk. If she is such a deep one as you seem to think, she would hide such an incriminating bit of evidence."

"She didn't know we suspected her. Of course, you haven't shadowed her a little bit?"

"There is a limit to detective duty in the case

of a gentleman," returned the colonel haughtily. "I have not."

Little Birdsall sighed; then in a propitiatory tone: "Well, of course, we both think there are other people in the job; I don't know exactly what you mean by bigger game, but I can make a stagger at it. Now, say, did you get any answer when you wrote to Keatcham himself?"

"Yes," said the colonel grimly, "I heard. You know the sort of letter I wrote; telling him of our dreadful anxiety and about the lad's being an orphan; don't you think it was the sort of letter a decent man would answer, no matter how busy he might be?"

"Sure. Didn't you get an answer?"

"I did." The colonel extricated himself from his wrappings enough to find a pale blue envelope, which he handed to Birdsall, at the same time taking the motor handle. "You see; type-written, very polite, chilly sort of letter, kind to make a man hot under the collar and swear at Keatcham's heartlessness. Mr. Keatcham unable to answer, having been ill since he left San Francisco. Did not see anything of any boy. Probably boy ran away. Has no information of any kind to afford. And the writer is very sincerely mine. The min-

ute I read it I was sure Mercer wrote it; and he wrote it to make me so disgusted with Keatcham I wouldn't pursue the subject with him. Just the same way he snubbed my aunt; and, for that matter, just the way he tried to snub me on the train. But he missed his mark; I wired every hotel in Santa Barbara and every one in Los Angeles; and Keatcham isn't there and hasn't been there. He has a big bunch of mail at Santa Barbara waiting for him, forwarded from Los Angeles, but he hasn't shown himself."

Birdsall shot a glance of cordial admiration at the colonel. "You're all there, General," he cried with unquenchable familiarity. "I've been trying to call up the Keatcham outfit, and *I* couldn't get a line, either. They haven't used the tickets they bought—their reservations went empty to Los Angeles. Now, what do you make out of that?"

"I make out that Archie is only part of their game," replied the soldier. "Now see, Birdsall, you are not going to get a couple of rich young college fellows to do just plain kidnapping and scaring women out of their money—"

"Lord, General," interrupted Birdsall, "those college guys don't turn a hair at kidnapping;

they regularly steal the president of the freshman class, and the things they do at their hazing bees and initiations would make an Apache Indian sit up and take notice. I tell you, General, they're the limit for deviltry."

"Some kinds. Not that kind; it's too dirty. Arnold was one of the cleanest foot-ball players at Harvard. And I don't know anything about human nature if that other youngster isn't decent. But Mercer—*es un loco;* you can look out for anything from him. Now, see the combination. Arnold was at Harvard! I have traced the motor-car they used to him; and then, if you add that his father is away safe in Europe and he has an empty house, off to one side, with a quantity of space around it and the reputation of being haunted, why—"

"It looks good to me. And I understand my men have got around it on the quiet all right. How's your man Haley got on, hiring out to the Jap in charge?"

"Well enough; the Jap took him on to mow, but either Mr. Caretaker doesn't know anything or he won't tell. He's bubbling over with conversation about the flowers and the country and the Philippines, where he used to be; but he only

knows that the honorable family are all away and he is to shun the house. Aren't we almost there?"

"Just around the corner. I guess when you see it you'll think it's just the *patio* a spook of taste would freeze to."

"*Why* is it haunted?"

"Now you have me. I ain't on to such dream stuff. Gimme five cards. Mrs. Arnold died off in Europe, so 'tain't her; and the house has only been built two years; but the neighbors have seen lights and heard groans and a pick chopping at the stones. Some folks say the land belonged to an old miner and he died before he could tell where he'd buried his *mazuma;* so he is taking a little *buscar* after it. There's the house, General."

The street climbed a gentle hill, and on its crest a large house, in mission style, looked over a pleasant land. Its position on a corner and the unusual size of the grounds about it gave the mansion an effect of space. Of almost rawly recent erection though it was, the kindly climate had so fostered the growth of the pines, acacias and live-oaks, the eucalypti and the orange-trees, which made a rich blur of color on the hillside, had so lavishly tended the creeping ivies and Bougain-

villeas which masked the rounded lantern arches of the stern gray façade, and so sumptuously blazoned the flower-beds in the garden on the one hand, yet, on the other, had so cunningly dulled the greenish gray of the cobblestones from California arroyos in chimney and foundation, and had so softly streaked the marble of the garden statues and the plaster of walls and mansion with tiny filaments of lichens or faint green moss, that the beholder might fancy the house to be the ancient home of some Spanish hidalgo, handed down with an hereditary curse, through generations, to the last of his race. One was tempted to such a flutter of fancy because of the impression given by the mansion. A sullen reticence hung about the place. The windows, for the most part, were heavily shuttered. Not a pane of glass flashed back at the sunlight; even those casements not shuttered turned blank dark green shades, like bandaged eyes, on the court and the beautiful terraces and the lovely sweep of hillsides where the wonderful shadows swayed and melted.

The bent figure of a man raking, distorted by the perspective, was visible just beyond the high pillars of the gateway. He paid no attention to the motions of the motor-car, nor did he answer

a hail until it was repeated. Then he approached the car. Birdsall was in the roadway trying to unlock the gate. The man, whose Japanese features were quite distinguishable, bowed; he explained that the honorable owners were not at home; his insignificant self was the only keeper of the grounds. He spoke sufficiently good English with the accompaniment of a deprecatory, amiable smile. Birdsall, in turn, told him that his own companion was a very great gentleman from the East who belonged to a society of vast power which was investigating spectral appearances, and that he had come thousands of miles to see the ghost.

The Japanese extended both hands, while the appeal of his smile deepened. "Too bad, velly," he murmured, "but not leally any g'lost, no, nev'."

"Don't you believe in the ghost?" asked Colonel Winter.

"No, me Clistian boy, no believe not'ing."

"All the samee," said the colonel, laboriously swinging himself from his vantage-ground of the motor seat to the flat top of the wall, thence dropping to the greensward below, "allee samee, like go in house hunt ghost." He crackled a bank-note in the palm of the slim brown hand, smiling and

nodding as if to break the force of his brusque action. Meanwhile, Birdsall had safely shut off his engine before he placed himself beside the others with an agility hardly to be expected of his rotund build.

As for the caretaker, whether because he perceived himself outnumbered, or because he was really void of suspicion, he accepted the money with outward gratitude and proffered his guidance through the garden and the orchards. He slipped into the rôle of cicerone with no atom of resistance; he was voluble; he was gracious; he was artlessly delighted with his señors. In spite of this flood of suavity, however, there seemed to be no possibility of persuading him to admit them to the house.

Assured of this, the two fell back for a second, time for the merest eyeflash from the detective to the soldier, who at once limped briskly up to the Jap, saying: "We are very much obliged to you; this is a beautiful house, beautiful gardens; but we want to see the ghost; and if you can give me young Mr. Arnold's address I will see him—or write, and we can come back."

The gardener, with many apologies and smiles, did not know Mr. Arnold's honorable address, but

he drew out a soiled card, explaining that it bore the name of the gentleman in charge of the property. Birdsall, peering over the Jap's shoulders, added that it was the card of a well-known legal firm.

"Then," said the colonel with deliberation, "we will thank you again for your courtesy, and—what's that?"

The Jap turned; they all started at the barking detonation of some explosion; while they gazed about them there came another booming sound, and they could see smoke pouring from the chimney and leaking through the window joints of a room in the rear of the house. Like a hare, not breaking his wind by a single cry, the Jap sped toward the court. The others were hard on his heels, though the colonel limped and showed signs of distress by the time they reached the great iron door.

The Jap pulled out a key; he turned it and swung the door barely wide enough to enter, calling on them to stay out; he would tell them if he needed them.

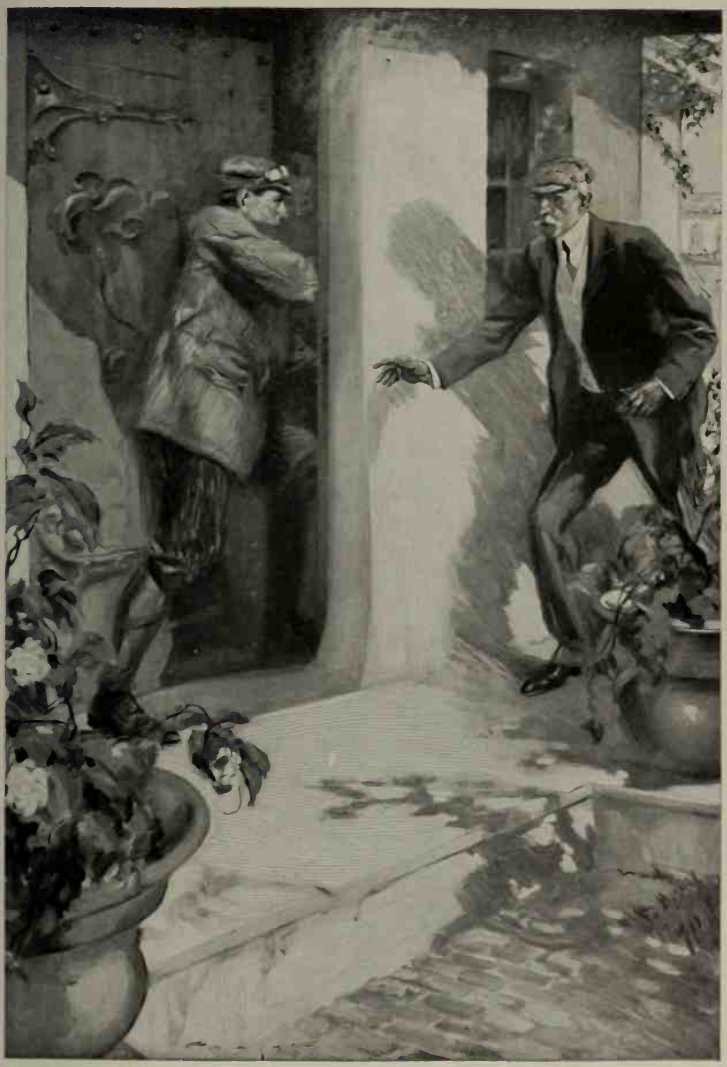
"Augustly stay; maybe honolable t'ieves!" he cried.

But the detective had interposed a stalwart leg

and shoulder. Instantly the door swung open; he acted as if he had lost his wits with excitement. "You're burning up! Lord! you're burning! *Fire! Fire!*" he bawled, and rushed boldly into the room.

Winter followed him, also calling aloud in a strident voice. And it was to be observed, being such an unusual preparation for a conflagration, that he had drawn a heavy revolver and ran with it in his hand. Before he jumped out of the car he had discarded his thick top-coat and all his wrappings.

An observer, also (had there been one near), would have taken note of a robust Irishman, who had been weeding the flower-beds, and would have seen him straighten at the first peal of the explosion, stare wildly at the chimneys before any distinct smoke was to be seen, then run swiftly and climb up to a low chimney on a wing of the house, watering-pot in hand. He would have seen him empty his inadequate fire extinguisher and rapidly descend the ladder, while the smoke volleyed forth, as if defying his puny efforts; later, he would have seen the watering-pot bearer pursue the others into the house, emitting noble yells of "Fire!" and "Help!"



The detective had interposed a stalwart leg and shoulder. Page 135

Further, this same observer, had he been an intimate friend of Sergeant Dennis Haley, certainly would have recognized that resourceful man of war in the amateur fireman.

CHAPTER VIII

FACE TO FACE

When the two men got into the house the dim rooms made them stumble for a moment after the brilliant sunshine of the outer skies; but in a second Birdsall's groping hand had found an electric push-button and the room was flooded with light. They were in a small office off the kitchen, apparently. Smoke of a peculiarly pungent odor and eye-smarting character blurred all the surroundings; but during the moment the Jap halted to explore its cause the others perceived two doors and made for them. One was locked, but the other must have been free to open, since Haley, with his watering-can, bounded through it while they were tugging at the other. Almost immediately, however, Haley was back again shouting and pointing down the dark passage.

"The fire's *there,*" screamed the detective. "I can smell smoke! The smoke comes through the keyhole!" But while the Jap fitted a key in the

lock and swung back the door, and Haley, who had paused to replenish his watering-can at a convenient faucet, darted after the other two, the colonel stood listening with every auditory nerve strained to catch some sound. He yelled "Fire! help!" at the top of his voice, but not moving a muscle. "Too far off," he muttered, then he yelled again and threw a heavy chair as if he had stumbled against it. Another pause; he got down on his knees to put his ear to the floor. Directly he rose; he did not speak, but the words that he said to himself were only: "Just possible. Some one down cellar; but not under here." Meanwhile he was hurrying in pursuit of the others as swiftly as his stiff knee would allow. He found them in a side hall with tiled or brick floor, gathered about a water-soaked heap of charred red paper.

"'Tis terrible!" announced Haley, "a bum for sure! a dinnermite bum!"—fishing out something like a tin tomato can from the sodden mass.

"Anyhow, *there* goes the real thing," observed the colonel coolly, as a formidable explosion jarred the air.

"If you blow us up, I kill you flist!" hissed the Jap, and his knife flashed.

"*Chito, Chito!*" soothed the colonel, lifting his

revolver almost carelessly. Simultaneously two brawny arms pinioned the Jap's own arms at his sides.

"Shure, Mister Samurai, 'tis the ongrateful chap youse is," expostulated Haley. "I hate to reshtrain ye, but if ye thry any jehujits on me 'twill be sahanara wid youse mighty quick."

"No understan'," murmured the Jap plaintively. "Why you hult me?"

"Come, put out the fire first," said the colonel; "you know the house, you go ahead."

The Jap darted on ahead so swiftly that they had some ado to follow; which seemed necessary, since he might have clashed a bolt on them at any turn. The colonel's stiff leg kept him in the rear, but Haley was never a hand's breadth behind the runner.

They found smoke in two places, but they easily extinguished the tiny flames. In both cases the bombs turned out to be no more dangerous than a common kind of fireworks yielding a suffocating smoke in an inclosure, but doing no especial damage on safe and fire-proof ground, like a hearth. They were quickly extinguished. In their search they passed from one luxurious room to another, the Jap leading, until he finally halted in a spa-

cious library hung in Spanish leather, with ancient, richly carved Spanish tables and entrancing Spanish chairs of turned wood and age-mellowed cane, and bookcases sumptuously tempting a book-lover. But the colonel cared only for the soul of a book, not its body; the richest and clearest of black letter or the daintiest of tooling had left him cold; moreover, every fiber in him was strung by his quest; and Haley, naturally, was immune; strangely enough, it was the cheerful, vulgar little detective who gave a glance, rapid but full of admiration, at the shelves and pile of missals on the table, incongruously jostled by magazines of the day.

Winter faced the Jap, who was sheathed again in his bland and impassive politeness. "Where is Mr. Mercer?" said he.

The Jap waved his hands in an eloquent oriental gesture. He assured the honorable questioner that he did not know any Mr. Mercer. There was no one in the house.

The colonel had seated himself in a priceless arm-chair in Cordova stamped leather; he no longer looked like an invalid. "Show your star, please," he commanded Birdsall, and the latter silently flung back the lapel of his coat.

"I ought to tell you," continued Rupert Winter, "that the game is up. It would do no good for you to run that poisoned bit of steel of yours into me or into any of us; we have only to stay here a little too long and the police of San Francisco will be down on you—oh, I know all about what sort they are, but we have money to spend as well as you. You take the note I shall write to Mr. Mercer, or whatever you choose to call him, and bring his answer. We stay here until he comes."

Having thus spoken in an even, gentle voice, he scribbled a few words on a piece of paper which he took out of his note-book. This he proffered to the Jap.

On his part, the latter kept his self-respect; he abated no jot of his assurance that they were alone in the house; he insinuated his suspicion that they were there for no honest purpose; finally he was willing to search the house if they would stay where they were.

"I am not often mistaken in people," was the colonel's rather oblique answer, "and I think you are a gentleman who might kill me if you had a chance, but would not break his word to me. If you will promise to play fair with us, do no harm

to my nephew, take this letter and bring me an answer—if you find any one—on your word of honor as a Japanese soldier and gentleman, you may go; we will not signal the police. Is it a bargain?"

The Jap gravely assented, still in the language of the East, "saving his face" by the declaration of the absence of his principals. And he went off as gracefully and courteously as if only the highest civilities had passed between them.

"Won't he try some skin game on us?" the detective questioned; but Winter only motioned toward the telephone desk. "Listen at it," he said, "you can tell if the wires are cut; and he knows your men are outside hiding, somewhere; he doesn't know how many. You see, we have the advantage of them there; to be safe they don't dare to let many people into their secret. *We* can have a whole gang. We haven't many, but they may *think* we have."

Birdsall, who had lifted the receiver to his ear, laid it down with an appeased nod. Immediately he proceeded to satisfy his professional conscience by a search in every nook and cranny of the apartment. But no result appeared important enough to justify the production of his red morocco note-

book and his fountain-pen. He had paused in disgust when the colonel sat up suddenly, erect in his chair; his keener ears had caught some sound which made him dart to all the windows in succession. He called Haley (whom he had posted outside to guard the door) and despatched him across the hall to reconnoiter. "I am sure it was the sound of wheels," he explained, "but Haley will be too late; we are on the wrong side of the house."

As he spoke the buzz of an electric bell jarred their ears. "Somebody is coming in the front door," hazarded Birdsall.

"Evidently," returned the colonel dryly. "How can our absent friends get in otherwise—at least how can they let us understand they have come in? I think we are going to have the pleasure of an interview with the elusive Mr. Mercer."

They waited. The colonel motioned Birdsall to a seat by the table, within breathing distance of the telephone. He himself fluttered the loose journals and magazines, his ironic smile creasing his cheek. "Our Japanese friend reads the newspapers," he remarked. "Here are to-day's papers; yes, *Examiner* and *Chronicle,* unfolded and smoked over. Cigar, too, not cigarette, for here

is a stump—decidedly our cherry-blossom friends are getting civilized!"

"Oh, there is somebody *in* here all right," grunted Birdsall. "Say, Colonel, you are sure Mrs. Winter has had no answer to her ad? No kind of notice about sending money?"

"I haven't seen her for a few hours, but I saw Mrs. Melville Winter; she was positive no word had come. She thought my aunt was more worried than she would admit, and Miss Smith looked pale, although she seemed hopeful."

"She didn't really want to give me the letter, I thought," said the detective. The colonel gave him no reply save a black look. A silence fell. A footfall outside broke it, a firm, in no wise stealthy footfall. Birdsall slipped his hand inside his coat. The colonel rose and bowed gravely to Cary Mercer.

On his part, Mercer was not in the least flurried; he looked at the two men, not with the arrogant suspicion which had stung Winter on the train, but with the melancholy courtesy of his bearing at Cambridge, three years before.

"This, I think, is Colonel Winter?" he said, returning the bow, but not extending his hand, which hung down, slack and empty at his side.

"I am glad you recognized me this time, Mr. Mercer."

"I am sorry that I did not recognize you before," answered Mercer. "Will you gentlemen be seated? I am not the owner of the house nor his son; I am not even a friend, only a casual acquaintance of the young man, but I seem to be rather in the position of host, so will you be seated, and may I offer you some Scotch and Shasta—Mr.—ah—"

"Mr. Horatio Birdsall, of the Birdsall and Gwen Detective Agency," interposed Winter. Birdsall bowed. Mercer bowed. "Excuse me if I decline for us both; our time is limited—no, thank you, not a cigar, either. Now, Mr. Mercer, to come to the point, I want my nephew. I understand he is in this house."

"You are quite mistaken," Mercer responded with unshaken calm. "He is not."

"Where is he, then?"

"I do not know, Colonel Winter. What I should recommend is for you to go back to the Palace, and if you do not find him there—why, come and shoot us up again!" His eye strayed for a second to the blackened, reeking mass on the great stone hearth.

"Have you sent him home? Is that what you mean to imply?"

"I imply nothing, Colonel; I don't dare to with such strenuous fighters as you gentlemen; only go and see, and if you do find the young gentleman has had no ill treatment, no scare—only a little adventure such as boys like, I hope you will come out here, or wherever I may be, and have that cigar you are refusing."

The colonel was frankly puzzled. He couldn't quite focus his wits on this bravado which had nothing of the bravo about it, in fact had a tinge of wistfulness in its quiet. One would have said the man regretted his compulsory attitude of antagonism; that he wanted peace.

Mercer smiled faintly. "You ought to know by this time when a man is lying, Colonel," he continued, "but I will go further. I may have done plenty of wrong things in my life, some things, maybe, which the law might call a crime; but I have never done anything which would debar me from passing my word of honor as a gentleman; nor any one else from taking it. I give you my word of honor that I have meant and I do mean no slightest harm to Archie Winter; and that, while I do not *know* where he is at this

speaking, I believe you will find him safe under your aunt's protection when you get back to the Palace."

"Call up the Palace Hotel, Mr. Birdsall," was the colonel's reply. "Mr. Mercer, I do not distrust that you are speaking exactly, but you know your Shakespeare; and there are promises which keep their word to the ear but break it to the sense."

"I don't wonder at your mistake; but you are mistaken, suh."

Birdsall was phlegmatically ringing up Mrs. Winter, having the usual experience of the rash person who intrudes his paltry needs on the complex workings of a great hotel system.

"No, I don't know the number, I haven't the book here, but *you* know, Palace Hotel. Well give me Information, then—Busy? Well, give me another Information, then—yes, I want the Palace Hotel—P-a-l-a-c-e—yes, yes, Palace Hotel; yes, certainly. Yes? Mrs. Archibald Winter. Yes—line busy? Well, hold on until it is disengaged. Say, Miss Furber, that you? This is Birdsall and Gwen. Yes. Give me Mrs. Winter, will you, 337? This Mrs. Winter? Oh! When will she be back? Is Mrs. Melville Winter in?

Well, Miss Smith in? She's gone, too? Has Master Archibald got back, yet, to the hotel? Hasn't? Thank you—eh?" in answer to the colonel's interruption. "What say, Colonel?"

"Tell her to call up this number,"—the colonel read it out of the telephone book—"when Master Archie does get back, will you? I am afraid, Mr. Mercer, that you will have to allow us to trespass on your hospitality for a little longer."

He suspected that Mercer was annoyed, although he answered lightly enough: "As you please, Colonel Winter. I am sure you will hear very soon. Now, there is another matter, your machine; I understand you left it outside. Will you ring for Kito, Colonel? Under the circumstances you may prefer to do your own ringing. I will ask him to attend to the car."

The colonel made proper acknowledgments. He was thinking that had Mercer cared to confiscate the motor, he would have done it without ringing; on the other hand, did he desire some special intercourse with his retainer, wherein, under their very noses, he could issue his orders—well, possibly they might get a whiff of the secret themselves were he allowed to try. At present the game baffled him. Therefore he nodded at Bird-

sall's puckered face behind Mercer's shoulder. And he rang the bell.

The Jap answered it with suspicious alacrity.

"Kito," said Mercer, "will you attend to General Winter's car? Bring it up to the court."

Absolutely harmless, to all appearances, but Birdsall, from his safe position behind master and man, looked shrewd suspicion at the soldier.

"Shall your man in the hall go with him?" asked Mercer.

The colonel shook his head. "No," he said quietly, "we have other men outside if he needs help. Call Skid, please." But when Birdsall attempted to get Central there was no response.

The colonel merely shrugged his shoulders, although Birdsall frowned with vexation. "What a pity!" said Winter softly. "Now the fellows will come when the time is up; we can't call them off."

Mercer smiled faintly. "There are two more telephones in the house," he observed. "You can call off your dogs easily any time you wish. Also you can hear from the Palace. Will you come upstairs with me? I assure you I have not the least intention to harm you or the honest sergeant."

"You take the first trick, Mercer," said the colonel. "I supposed the bell was your signal to have

the wires cut. But about going; no, I think we will stay here. There is a door out on the court which, if you will open—thank you. A charming prospect! Excuse me if I send Haley out there; and may I go myself?"

Anticipating the answer, he stepped under the low mission lintel into a fairy-like Californian court or *patio* of pepper-trees and palms and a moss-grown fountain. There was the usual colonnade with a stone seat running round the wall. Mercer, smiling, motioned to one of them. "I wish I could convince you, Colonel, that you are in no need of that plaything in your hand, and that you are going to dine with your boy—isn't he a fine fellow?"

The colonel did not note either his admission that he had seen Archie, nor a curious warming of his tone; he had stiffened and grown rigid like a man who receives a blow which he will not admit. He stole a glance at the detective and met an atrocious smirk of complacency. They both had caught a glimpse of a figure flitting into a door of the court. They both had seen a woman's profile and a hand holding a little steel tool which had ends like an alligator's nose. And both men had recognized Miss Smith.

CHAPTER IX

THE AGENT OF THE FIRELESS STOVE

The time was two hours later. Rupert Winter was sitting on one of the stone benches of the colonnade about the *patio*. The court was suffused with the golden glow presaging sunset. Warm afternoon shadows lay along the flags; wavering silhouettes of leafage or plant; blurred reflections from the bold bas-reliefs of Spanish warriors and Spanish priests sculptured between the spandrels of the arches. Winter's dull eyes hardly noted them: the exotic luxuriance of foliage, the Spanish armor and Spanish cowls were all too common to a denizen of a Spanish colony in the tropics, to distract his thoughts from his own ugly problem. He had been having it out with himself, as he phrased it. And there had been moments during those two hours, when he had ground his teeth and clenched his fists because of the futile and furious pain in him.

When he recognized Janet Smith, by that same

illuminating flash he recognized that this woman who had been tricking him was the woman that he loved. He believed that he had said his last word to love, but love, after seeming to accept the curt dismissal, was lightly riding his heart again. "Fooled a second time," he thought with inexpressible bitterness, recalling his unhappy married life and the pretty, weak creature who had caused him such humiliation. Yet with her there had been no real wrong-doing, only absolute lack of discretion and a childish craving for gaiety and adulation. Poor child! what a woeful ending for it all! The baby, the little boy who was their only living child, to die of a sudden access of an apparently trifling attack of croup, while the mother was dancing at a post ball! He was East, taking his examination for promotion. The frantic drive home in the chill of the dawn had given her a cold which her shock and grief left her no strength to resist—she was always a frail little creature, poor butterfly!—and she followed her baby inside of a month. Had she lived, her husband might have found it hard to forgive her, for already a sore heart was turning to the child for comfort; but she was dead, and he did not let his thoughts misuse her memory. Now—here was an-

other, so different but just as false. Then, he brought himself up with a jerk; he would be fair; he would look at things as they were; many a man had been fooled by the dummy. He would not jump at conclusions because they were cruel, any more than he would because they were kind. There was such a thing, he knew well, as credulous suspicion; it did more harm than credulous trust. Meanwhile, he had his detail. He was to find Archie; therefore, he waited. They were in the house; it were only folly to give up their advantage under the stress of any of Mercer's plausible lurings to the outside.

Moreover, by degrees, he became convinced that Mercer, certainly to some extent, was sincere in his profession of belief in Archie's absence and safety. This, in spite of hearing several times that Archie was not returned. Mercer did all the speaking, but he allowed Birdsall to hold the receiver and take the message from Mrs. Winter.

The telephone was in an adjoining room, but by shifting his position a number of times the colonel was able to catch a murmur of the conversation. He heard Mercer's voice distinctly. He had turned away and was following the detective out of the room. "I don't understand it any more

than you do, Mr. Birdsall," he said; "you won't believe me, suh, but I am right worried."

"Of course I believe you," purred the detective so softly that the colonel knew he did not believe any more than Mercer suspected. "Of course I believe you; but I don't know what to do. It ain't on the map. I guess it's up to you to throw a little light. I've called the boys off twice already and told 'em to wait an hour or a half-hour longer. I got to see the colonel."

"I can trust my intuitions, or I can trust the circumstantial evidence," thought the colonel. He jumped up and began to pace the court.

"Seems to be like a game of bridge before one can see the dummy," he complained; and as so often happens in the crises of life, a trivial illustration struck a wavering mind with the force of an argument. His thoughts reverted whimsically to the card-table; how many times had he hesitated over the first lead between evenly balanced suits of four; and how often had he regretted or won, depending solely upon whether his card instinct had been denied or obeyed! It might be instinct, this much-discussed "card instinct," or it might be a summing up of logical deductions so swift that the obscure steps were lost, and the

reasoner was unconscious of his own logical processes. "Now," groaned Rupert Winter, "I am up against it. She *looks* like a good woman; she *seems* like a good woman; but I have only my impressions and Aunt Rebecca's against the apparent facts in the case. Well, Aunt Rebecca is a shrewd one!" He sat down and thought harder. Finally he rose, smiling. He had threshed out his problem; and his conclusion, inaudibly but very distinctly uttered to himself, was: "Me for my own impressions! If that girl is in with this gang, either what they are after isn't so bad—or they have made her believe it isn't bad."

He looked idly about him at the arched doorway of the outer court. It was carved with a favorite mission design of eight-pointed flowers with vase-like fluting below. There was a tiny crack in one of the flowers, the tiniest crack in the world. He looked at it without seeing it, or seeing it with only the outer half of his senses, but—he could not have told how—into his effort to pierce his own tangle there crept a sudden interest, a sudden keenness of scrutiny of this minute, insignificant crack in the stone. He became aware that the crack was singularly regular, preserving the form of the flower and the fluting beneath.

Kito, the Japanese, who was sitting at the far end of the court, conversing in amity with Haley, just here rose and came to this particular pillar. The Irishman sat alone, rimmed by the sunset gold, little spangles of motes drifting about him; for the merest second Winter's glance lingered on him ere it went to the Jap, who passed him, courteously saluting.

After he had passed, the colonel looked again at the column and the crack—it was not there.

"*Chito, chito!*" muttered the colonel. Carelessly he approached the column and took the same posture as the Jap. Unobtrusively his fingers strayed over the stone. He scratched the surface; not stone, but cement. He tapped cautiously, keeping his hand well hidden by his body; no hollow sound rewarded him; but all at once his groping fingers touched a little round object under the bold point of an eight-pointed flower. He didn't dare press on it; instead he resumed his cautious tapping. It seemed to him that the sound had changed. He glanced about him. Save for Haley he was alone in the *patio*. He pressed on the round white knob, and what he had half expected happened: a segment of the column swung on inner hinges, disclosing the hollow

center of the engaged columns on either side. He looked down. Nothing but darkness was visible, but while he stood, tensely holding his breath, his abnormally sensitive auricular nerve caught distinctly the staccato breath of that kind of sigh which is like a groan, and a voice said more wearily than angrily: "Oh, damn it all!"

Almost simultaneously, he heard the faint footfalls of the men within; he must replace his movable flower. The column was intact, and he was bending his frowning brows on the stylobate of another when Birdsall and Mercer entered together, Mercer, with a shrug of his shoulders at the detective's dogged suspicion, preceding the latter.

"Well," said the colonel, "did you get my aunt?"

"Yes, suh, I got your aunt herself," responded Mercer, with his Virginian survival of the formal civility of an earlier generation. "Yes, suh; but I regret to say Archie is not there."

"Where is he?" The soldier's voice was curt.

"Honestly," declared Mercer, "I wish I knew, suh, I certainly *do*. But—" Mercer's jaw fell; he turned sharply at the soft whir of an electric

stanhope gently entering the *patio* through the great arched gateway. It stopped abreast of the group, and its only occupant, a handsome young man, jumped nimbly out of the vehicle. He greeted them with a polite removal of his cap, a bow, and a flashing smile which made the circuit of the beholders. Birdsall and the colonel recognized the traveling enthusiast of the Fireless Stove.

The colonel took matters into his own hands.

"I think you're the young gentleman who took my nephew away," said he. "Will you kindly tell us where he is?"

"And don't get giddy, young gentleman," Birdsall chimed in, "because we know perfectly well that you are *not* the agent of the Peerless Fireless Stove."

"I've got one here on trial, and I've come back to see if they like it," explained the young man, in silken accents, but with a dancing gleam of the eyes.

"We are going to keep it," said Mercer. "Kito," calling the unseen Jap, "fetch that Fireless Stove this gentleman left us, and show it to this gentleman here."

"Oh, cut it out!" Birdsall waved him off.

"It's only ten minutes before our fellows will come. You can put the police court wise with all that. Try it on *them;* it don't go with us."

"Where is the boy?" said the colonel.

"Tell him, if you know," said Mercer. "This gentleman," he explained, "left a stove with us to test. He was here about it this morning, and we gave Archie to *him* to take to the Palace Hotel."

"And he is there now," said the young man.

"Did you leave him there?" asked the colonel.

"Yes, *did* you?" insisted Mercer.

The young man looked from Mercer to the other two men. There was no visible appeal to the Southerner, but Winter felt sure of two things: one, that the new-comer was Mercer's confederate whom he was striving to shield by pretending to disavow; the other, that for some reason Mercer was as anxious for the answer as were they.

"Why-y," hesitated the stove promoter, "you see, Mr.—ah, gentlemen, you see, I was told to take the boy to the Palace Hotel, and I set out to do it. We weren't going at more than an eight-mile-an-hour clip, yet some foozler of a cop arrested us for speeding. It was perfectly ridiculous, and I tried to shake him, but it was no use.

They carried us off to a police court and stuck me for ten dollars. Meanwhile my machine and my passenger were outside. When I got outside I couldn't find them. I skirmished around, and finally did get the machine. I'd taken the precaution to fix it so it couldn't be run before I left it—took the key out, you know—it must have been trundled off by hand somewhere!—but I couldn't find the boy. Naturally, I was a bit worried; but after I had looked up the force and the neighborhood, it occurred to me to 'phone to the Palace. I did, and I was told he was there."

"Who told you?" The question came simultaneously out of three throats.

"Why, Mrs. Winter—that's what she called herself."

"But not three minutes ago Mrs. Winter told me that he wasn't there," remarked Mercer coldly. "*When* did you telephone?"

"It was at least fifteen minutes ago," the young man said dolefully. "I say, wouldn't you better call them up again? There may be some explanation. I shouldn't have come back without the kid if I hadn't been *sure* he was safe."

"Was it Mrs. Melville or Mrs. Winter you got?" This came from the colonel. "Did she by

chance have an English accent, or was it Southern?"

"Oh, no, not Southern," protested the young man. "Yes, I should say it was English—or trying to be."

"It would be exactly like Millicent," thought the colonel wrathfully, "to try to fool the kidnappers, who had apparently lost Archie, by pretending he was at the hotel!"

He made no comment aloud, but he nodded assent to Mercer's proposal to telephone; and then he walked up to the stove man.

"The game is up," he said quietly. "We have a lot of men waiting outside. If we signal, they will come any minute; if we don't signal, they will come in ten minutes. Give us a chance to be merciful to you. This is no kind of a scrape for your father's son—or for Arnold's."

Shot without range though it was, Winter was sure that it went home under all the young fellow's assumed bewilderment. He continued, looking kindly at him:

"You look now, I'll wager, about as you used to look in the office when you called on the dean—by invitation—and were wondering just where the inquiry was going to light!"

The dimple showed in the young man's cheek. "I admit," he replied, "that I didn't take advantage as I should of my university opportunities. Probably that is why I have to earn a strenuous livelihood boosting the Only Peerless Fireless Stove. By the way, have *you* ever seen the Fireless in action? Just the thing for the army! Fills a long-felt want. I should be very pleased to demonstrate. We have a stove here."

The colonel grinned responsively. "You do it very well," said he. "Can't you let me into the game?"

There was the slightest waver in the promoter's glance, although he smiled brilliantly as he answered: "I'll take it into consideration, but—will you excuse me? I want to speak to Mr. Mercer about the stove."

The moment he had removed his affable young presence Birdsall approached his employer. It had been a difficult quarter of an hour with the detective. Vague instinct warned him not to touch the subject of Miss Smith; he felt in no way assured about anything else. The result had been that he had fidgeted in silence. But the accumulated flood could no longer be held.

"I've found out one thing," exploded Birdsall,

puffing in the haste of his utterance. "The boy is on the premises."

"Think so?" was all the colonel's answer.

"I'm sure of it. Say, I overheard Mercer talking down a speaking-tube."

"What did he say?"

"Talked French, damn him! But say, what's *gorge?*"

"Throat."

"What's *cupillo gorge*?"

"Sure he wasn't talking of a carriage, or did he say *je le couperai la gorge?*"

"Maybe. I wouldn't swear to it. I don't *parlez français* a little bit."

"Did you hear any other noises? Where were they?"

Birdsall thought he had heard other noises, and that they were down cellar. "And anyhow, Colonel, I'm dead-to-rights sure those guys are giving us hot stuff to get us out of the house. I'm for getting our men in now and rushing the house. It's me for the cellar."

While the colonel was rolling Birdsall's information around in his mind, he heard the echo of steps on the flagging which preceded Mercer and the other man.

There was that in the bearing and the look of them that made the watcher, used to the signs of decision on men's faces, instantly sure that their whole course of plans and action was changed.

Mercer spoke first and in a low tone to the colonel.

"I have no right," said he, "to ask so much trust from you, but will you trust me enough to step aside with this young man and me for a moment only—out of ear-shot? I give you my word of honor I mean no slightest harm to you. I want to be frank. I will go alone if you desire."

The colonel eyed him intently for the briefest space. "I'll trust you," said he. Then: "I think you have the key to this queer mix-up. At your service. And let your friend come, too. He is an ingenuous sort, and he amuses me."

Birdsall looked distinctly sullen over the request to wait, intimating quite frankly that his employer was walking into a trap. "I won't stand here more than fifteen minutes," he grumbled. "I've given those fellows *poco tiente* long enough." But the colonel insisted on twenty minutes, and reluctantly Birdsall acquiesced.

Mercer conducted the others to the library.

When they were seated he began in his composed, melancholy fashion:

"I earnestly beg of you to listen to me, and to believe me, for your nephew's sake. I am going to tell you the absolute truth. It is the only way now. When you came, we handed him over to this gentleman, exactly as we have said. I do not know why he should have been stopped. I do not know why he left the machine—"

"Might he not have been *carried* away?" said Winter.

"He might; but I don't know what motive—"

"What motive had *you?* You kidnapped him!"

"Not exactly. We had no intention of harming him. He came accidentally into the room between Mrs. Winter's and Mr. Keatcham's suites. Standing in that room, trying to stanch the bleeding of a sudden hemorrhage of the nose, he overheard me and my friend—"

"*You?*" asked the colonel laconically of the young Harvard man.

"I," smilingly confessed the latter. "I am ready to own up. You are a decent fellow, and you are shrewd. You ought to be on our side, not fighting us. I tell you, you don't want to have the boy turn up safe and sound any more than I

do. Mr. Mercer was talking to me, and the kid overheard. We heard him and went into the room—"

"How?"

"Knocked on the door and he opened it. And we jumped on him. It was life and death for us not to be blown on; so, as we didn't wish to kill the kid, and as we didn't know the youngster well enough to trust him *then*—although we might, for he is game and the whitest chap!—but we didn't know—why, we just told him he would have to stay with us a while until our rush was over. That was all we meant; and we let him 'phone you."

"How about his great-aunt—the cruel anxiety—"

"Anxiety nothing!" began the other man, but a glance from Mercer cut him short.

The Southerner took the word in his slow, gentle voice. "I tried to reassure our aunt, Colonel Winter. I think I succeeded. She telephoned and I told her it was all right. As for Archie, after we talked with him, he was willing enough to go. He stole out with my friend inside of five minutes, while you all were searching your rooms. It was *he* insisted on calling you up, lest

you should be worried. He said you were right afraid of kidnappers, and you would be sending the police after us. You can call Mrs. Winter up and find out if I am not telling you the exact facts."

"Very well, I *will*," said Winter. They met the sullen detective at the door. Cary Mercer, with his mirthless smile, led the way. Mercer rang up the hotel for Winter, himself. To the colonel's vast relief Aunt Rebecca answered the call.

"*Est-ce que c'est vous-même, mon neveu?*" said she dryly.

"*Mais oui, ma tante.* Why are you speaking so formally in foreign tongues? Is Millicent on deck?"

"In her room," came the answer, still in French. "Well, you have got us in a pretty mess. Where is my boy?"

"I only wish I knew! Tell me now, though, is Mercer's story straight?"

"Absolutely. You may trust him."

"What's his real game, then? The one he was afraid Archie would expose?"

"Ask him."

"But *you* are in it, aren't you?"

"Enough to ask that you abandon the chase—immediately! Unless you wish to ruin me!"

"You'll have to speak plainer. I've been kept in the dark as long as I can stand in this matter."

But before he could finish the sentence. *"Pas ici, pas maintenant—c'est trop de péril,"* she cried, and she must have gone, for he could get no more from her. When he rang again, Randall responded:

"Mrs. Winter says, sir, will you please come up here as quick as you can. She's gone out. She thought she caught sight of Mr. Archie on the street."

To the colonel's demand, "Where, how did she see him?" he obtained no answer, and on his vicious pealing of the bell there came, eventually, mellow Anglican accents which asked: "Yes? Whom do you wish to see?" It is an evidence of the undisciplined nature of the sex that the soldier made a face and—hung up the receiver.

He found himself—although this to a really open mind is no excuse—in a muddle of conflicting impulses. He was on edge to get into the street for the search after the boy; he was clutched in a vise by his conviction that the clue to Archie's whereabouts lay in Mercer's hands, and

that the Southerner meant no harm to the lad. And all the while he could feel Birdsall tugging at the leash.

"It's on the cards," he grumbled, with a wry face, "quite on the cards that he may bolt in spite of me, and do some foolish stunt of his own that will make a most awful muddle."

Not nearly so composed as he looked, therefore, he turned to Mercer. However, his ammunition was ready, and to Mercer's inquiry, was he satisfied? he replied calmly: "Well, not entirely. If Archie isn't in the house, *who* is it whose throat you wish to cut? Who is hidden here?"

It could not have been an unexpected question or Mercer hardly had answered so readily: "You know who it is," said he. "It is Mr. Keatcham."

CHAPTER X

THE SMOLDERING EMBERS

If Mercer's avowal surprised the colonel, there was no trace of such emotion in his face or his manner. "I rather thought it might be," he said. "And our young friend who is promoting Fireless Stoves with the solemn energy he learned doing Dicky stunts?"

"Mr. Endicott Tracy." Mercer had the manner of a ceremonious introduction. Tracy flavored the customary murmur of pleasure with his radiant smile.

"Pleased, I am sure," said the colonel in turn, bowing. "Your father, I suppose, is the president of the Midland; and Mr. Keatcham will, I suppose, not be able to prevent his reëlection tomorrow. Is that the game?"

Mr. Tracy's son admitted that it might be.

"Ah, very clever," said the colonel, "very. Any side-show, for example?"

"I did not go into this for money." Mercer's

level gaze did not relax, and he kept his dreary eyes unflinchingly on Winter's. A peculiar look in the eyes recalled some tragic and alien memory, just what, Rupert could not capture; it flitted hazily through his thoughts ere the next words drove it off. "Nevertheless, it is true that if we win out I shall have enough to pay back to all the people who trusted me the money they lost when they were frightened into selling their stock in the Tidewater, and your aunt and Mr. Tracy stand to make money."

"How do you expect to make it?"

"The M. and S. stock is away down because of rumors Keatcham is likely to control it. When it is settled it is not to be looted by him, the stock will rise—we are sure of the ten points; we may make twenty—"

"And my aunt has financed your scheme, has she?—paid all your expenses?"

The Harvard man laughed out. "Our *expenses?* Oh, yes, she has grub-staked us, all right; but she has done a good deal more—she has furnished more than half a million to us for our gamble."

The colonel considered; then: "But why did you keep him here so long beforehand?" said he.

"It was not long beforehand," said Mercer. "The meeting was adjourned for a day—we don't know why—we fancy that his partners suspect something. It is called for to-morrow, in spite of their efforts to have it put off a week. But we want more; we want to induce Keatcham to vote his own stock for us, and to call off his dogs himself."

"And you can't force him to do it?"

"We shall force him, easily enough," returned Mercer, "but we don't trust him. We want his private code-book to be sure he is playing fair. In fact, we have to have it, because nothing gets any attention that isn't, so to speak, properly introduced."

"And he will not give it to you?"

"Says he has lost it."

"Perhaps he *has,*" mused the soldier. "But now, all this is not my concern, except that I have no right, as a soldier, even passively to aid in breaking the laws. It is my duty to rescue and free Mr. Keatcham."

But before he could speak further Mercer lifted a hand in apologetic interruption. Would Colonel Winter excuse him, but he must ask Mr. Tracy to go back to the *patio* and have an eye on the

detective. Endicott only exchanged a single glance before he obeyed. Mercer's eyes followed him. "It was not to be helped," he said, half to himself, "but I have been sorry more than once that I had to take him into this."

Winter looked at him, more puzzled than he wanted to admit to himself; indeed, he was rather glad to have the next word come from Mercer.

"I have a few things I want to say to you; they go easier when we are alone—but won't you sit down?" When the colonel had seated himself he went on: "I'd like to explain things a bit."

"I'd like to have you," answered the soldier. "I think you have the clue to Archie's whereabouts and don't recognize it yourself; so put me wise, as the slang goes."

Then, without preface, in brief, nervous sentences, spoken hardly with a quiver of a muscle or a wavering cadence of the voice, yet nevertheless instinct with a deadly earnestness, Mercer began to talk. He told of his struggling youth on the drained plantation, mortgaged so that after the interest was paid there was barely enough to get the meagerest living for his mother and sister and little brother; of his accidental discovery of iron ore on the place; of his working as a com-

mon laborer in the steel mills; of his being "rooster," "strand-boy," "rougher," "heater," "roller," during three years while he was waiting for his chance; of his heart-draining toil; of his solitary studies.

"I never was the kind of fellow to make friends," he said, in his soft, monotonous voice, "so I expect I was the fonder of my own kin. I'd a mighty good mother, sir, and sister; and there was Phil—my little brother. We were right happy all together on the old place that's been in our family for a hundred years, and it was all we asked to stay there; but it had every dollar of mortgage it could stand, and the soil all worn out, needing all kinds of things; and I wish you could have seen the makeshifts we had for machines! I was blacksmith and carpenter and painter—just sixteen, and not an especially bright chap, but mighty willing to work; and my mother and Sis and I—we did a heap. When I stumbled on the ore I couldn't be sure, but I wrote to Aunt Rebecca Winter. She sent a man down. He looked up things. It would take a heap of money to work the mines, but it might be a big thing. She paid off the mortgage and took another. First to last, she's been mighty kind to

us. She would have done more had we let her. So I went to Pittsburgh and learned my trade, and I made enough to pay interest, and the people at home got a fairly good living. When I was twenty-one I was back home, and got a company started and put up a mill. You know how those things have to creep up. But there was ore, all right, and I understood my business and taught the hands. We'd a right sweet little mill. Well, I don't want to take up your time, suh. Those next ten or twelve years were right hard work, but they were happy, too. We prospered; we helped the whole county prosper. We paid Aunt Becky. We were in good shape. We went through '93 paying our dividends just as regular, and making them, too, though we didn't much more—it was close sailing. But we were honest; we made a mighty good article; and everybody trusted us. Then came the craze for mergers, and a number of us got together. Still we weren't very big, but we were big enough to be listed. I didn't want it, but some of the men thought it was a terrible fine thing to be 'Iron Kings.' That was how. Keatcham was looking over the country for fish for his net; he somehow heard that here was a heap of good ore and new mills. The first

intimation we had was his secretary coming as a Northern invalid—why, he stayed at our house because we were so sorry for him, the hotel being in new hands and not right comfortable. He seemed so interested in our mills, and bought some stock, and sent presents to Phil and my mother after he went."

"That was Keatcham's private secretary, you say?"

"Yes, suh, Atkins. You met him on the train—as sleek and deadly a little scoundrel as ever got rich quick. Oh, he's deep. Well, suh, you know the usual process. Convinced of the value of the property, Keatcham and one or two others set out to buy it. They got little blocks of it here and there. Then Atkins wrote me in confidence that some men were after the controlling interest and meant to squeeze us all out—offered to lend me money to buy—of course, on a margin. And I was plumb idiot enough to be tolled into his trap! I, who had never speculated with a dollar before, I didn't borrow *his* money, but I took all I could raise myself, and I bought enough to be sure I could control the next election. Then—the slump came, and after the slump the long, slow crumbling. I controlled the elec-

tion all right, of course, but before the next one came I was ruined, and Keatcham put his own men in. I went desperately to New York. I didn't know how to fight those fellows; it was a new game. I didn't find Atkins. Maybe because that wasn't his name when I had known him. I was so sure that the property was good—as if that mattered! As if anything mattered with these gamblers who play with loaded dice and dope the horses they bet against! Phil had all his property in the mills; we all had. We mortgaged the house; we had to, to protect our stock. You know how the fight ended, and what happened at Cambridge. That isn't all. My wife—" He stood a little straighter, and the light went out of his eyes. "I told you I don't make friends easily, and I am not the kind of man women take to; all the same, the loveliest girl in the South loved me ever since I jumped over the mill-dam to save her rag doll, once, when she was visiting her aunt near us. I'd married, when we seemed prosperous. Now, understand me, I don't say it was my ruin and Phil's death that killed her and the baby; she had pneumonia, and it may be that seeing that paper by accident didn't turn the scale; but I do say that she had her last hours

embittered by it. That's enough for me. When I got home with—with Phil, she was dead."

"Tough," said the colonel. He began to revise his impressions of Mercer.

"Wasn't it?" the other asked, with a simplicity of appeal that affected the listener more than anything he had heard. He jumped out of his chair and began pacing the room, talking more rapidly. "You're a *man;* you know what I wanted to do."

"Kill somebody, I suppose. *I* should."

"Just that. I ran Atkins to cover after a while through Endicott Tracy. That boy is one of the noblest fellows that ever lived; yes, suh. He was going to help poor Phil, Phil's room-mate had told him. All those boys—look a-here, Colonel Winter, if ever anybody talks to you about Harvard fellows being indifferent—"

"I shall tell him he can't get under the American surface. A Harvard boy will do anything on earth for his friends."

"They were mighty good to me. It was Endy found out about Atkins, just from my description of him. I found out about Keatcham for myself. And you are quite right—for a little while I wanted to kill them both. Looked like I just naturally *had* to kill them! But there was my

mother. There was nobody to take care of her but Sis and me, and a trial for murder is terribly expensive. Of course, anybody can get off who has got money and can spend it; but it takes such an awful heap of money. And we were all ruined together, for what little was left was all in the company, and that promptly stopped paying dividends. I couldn't risk it. I had to wait. I had to go to work to support my mother, to pay Sis and her back, don't you see? We came here. I got a job, a well-paid one, too, through Endy's father, reporting on the condition of the mills—a kind of examiner. And the job was for Keatcham."

"Why did you take it? I know, though. You did it to familiarize him with your appearance, so that he would not be warned when your chance came."

"How did you know that?"

"A man I knew in the Philippines—a Filipino—was wronged by a white man, who took his wife and threw her aside when he tired of her. The girl killed herself. Her husband watched his chance for a year, found it at last—thanks to that very fact that his victim wasn't on guard against him—and sent his knife home. He'd

been that fellow's servant. I picked the dead man up. That Filipino looked as you looked a minute ago."

"What became of the Filipino?" inquired his listener.

The colonel had not told the story quite without intention. He argued subconsciously, that if Mercer were a good sort under all, he would have a movement of sympathy for a more cruelly wronged man than he; if not, he would drive ahead to his purpose, whatever that might be. His keen eyes looked a little more gentle as he answered: "He poisoned himself. The best way out, I reckon. I should hate to have had him shot after I knew the story. But there was really no option. But I'm interrupting you. You did your work well and won Keatcham's confidence?"

"He isn't a very confiding man. I didn't see him often. My dealings were with Atkins. He didn't know that I had found him out; he thought that he had only to explain his two names, and expected gratitude for his warning, as he called it. He is slimy; but I was able to repay a little of my score with him. I was employed by more than Keatcham, and I saw a good many industrial back-yards. Just by chance, I came on a clue, and

Endy Tracy and I worked it up together. Atkins was selling information to Keatcham's enemies. We did not make out a complete case, but enough of one to make Keatcham suspect him, and at the right time. But that happened later—you see, I don't know how to tell a story even with so much at stake." He pulled out his handkerchief, and Winter caught the gleam of the beads on his sallow forehead. "It was this way," he went on. "At first I was only looking about for a safe chance to kill him, and to kill that snake of an Atkins; but then it grew on me; it was all too easy a punishment—just a quick death, when his victims had years of misery. I wanted him to wade through the hell *I* had to wade through. I wanted him to know *why* he was condemned. Then it was I began to collect just the cases I knew about—just one little section of the horrible swath of agony and humiliation and poverty and sin he and his crowd had made—the one I knew every foot of, because I'd gone over it every night I wasn't so dead tired I *had* to sleep. God! do you know what it is to have the people who used to be running out of their houses just to say howdy to you, curse you for a swindler or a fool or turn out of one street and down the other not

to pass you? Did *you* ever have a little woman who used to give you frosted cake when you were a boy push her crape veil off her gray hair and hand you the envelope with her stock, with your handwriting on the envelope, and beg you—trying so hard not to cry, 'twas worse than if she had—beg you to lend her just half her interest money—*and you couldn't do it?* Did you—never mind. I said I waded through hell. I *did!* Not I alone—that was the worst—all the people that had trusted me! And just that some rich men should be richer. Why should *they* have the lion's share? The lion's share belongs to the lion. *They* are nothing but jackals. They're meaner than jackals, for the jackals take what the lion leaves, and these fellows steal the lion's meat away from him. We made honest money; we paid honest wages; folks had more paint on their houses and more meat in their storehouses, and wore better clothes Sunday, and there were more schoolhouses and fewer saloons, and the negroes were learning a trade instead of loafing. The whole county was the better off for our prosperity, and there isn't a mill in the outfit—and I know what I'm talking about—there isn't a shop or a mine that's as well run or makes as big an output now

as it did when the old crowd was in. You find it that way everywhere; and that's what is going to break things down. We saw to all the little affairs; they were *our* affairs, don't you know? But Keatcham's new men draw their salaries and let things slide. Yet Keatcham is a great manager if he would only take the time; only he's too busy stealing to develop his businesses; there's more money in stealing a railway than in building one up. Oh, he isn't a fool; if I could once get him where he would *have* to listen, I know I could make him understand. He's pretty cold-blooded, and he doesn't realize. He only sees straight ahead, not all round, like all these superhumanly clever thieves; they have mighty stupid streaks. Well, I've got him now, and it is kill or cure for him. He can't make a riffle. I knew I couldn't do anything alone; I had to wait. I had to have stronger men than I am to help. By and by they tried their jackal business on a real lion—on Tracy. They wanted to steal *his* road. I got on to them first. I see a heap of people in a heap of different businesses—the little people who talk. They notice all right, but they can see only their own little patch. I was the fellow riding round and seeing the township. I pieced together the

plot and I told Endy Tracy. He wouldn't believe me at first, because his father had given Keatcham his first start and done a hundred things for him. To be sure, his father has been obliged as an honest man to oppose Keatcham lately, but Keatcham couldn't mean to burn him out that way. But he soon found that was precisely what Keatcham did mean. Then he was glad enough to help me save his father. The old man doesn't know a thing; we don't mean he ever shall know. We let him put up the best sort of a fight a man can with his hands tied while the other fellow is free. *My* hands are free, too. I don't respect the damned imbecile laws that let me be plundered any more than they do; and since my poor mother died last summer I am not afraid of anything; they *are;* that's where I have the choice of weapons. I tell you, suh, *nobody* is big enough to oppress a desperate man! Keatcham had one advantage—he had unlimited money. But Aunt Rebecca helped us out there. Colonel, I want you to know I didn't ask her for more than the bare grub-stake; it was she herself that planned our stock deal."

"She is a dead game sport," the colonel chuckled. "I believe you."

"And I hope you don't allow that I was willing

to have her mix herself in our risks. She would come; she said she wanted to see the fun—"

"I believe you again," the colonel assured him, and he remembered the odd sentence which his aunt had used the first night of their journey, when she expressed her hankering to match her wits against those of a first-class criminal.

"We didn't reckon on your turning up, or the complication with Archie. I wish to God we'd taken the boy's own word! But, now you know all about it, will you keep your hands off? That's all we ask."

"Well,"—the colonel examined his finger-nails, rubbing his hands softly, the back of one over the palm of the other—"well, you haven't quite told me all. Don't, unless you are prepared to have it used against you, as the policemen say *before* the sweat-box. What did you do to Keatcham to get him to go with you so like Mary's little lamb?"

"I learned of a little device that looks like a tiny currycomb and is so flat and small you can bind it on a man's arm just over an artery. Just press on the spring and give the least scratch, and the man falls down in convulsions. I showed him a rat I had had fetched me, and killed it like a flash. He had his choice of walking out quietly

with me—I had my hand on his arm—or dropping down dead. He went quietly enough."

"That was the meaning of his look at me, was it?" Winter thought. He said only: "Did Endicott Tracy know about that?"

"Of course not," Mercer denied. "Do you reckon I want to mix the boy up in this more than I have? And Arnold only knew I was trying some kind of bluff game."

"I will lay odds, though," the colonel ventured in his gentlest tone, "that Mr. Samurai, as Haley calls him, knew more. But when did you get rid of Atkins?"

"Mr. Keatcham discharged him at Denver. I met Mr. Keatcham here; it was arranged on the train. We had it planned out. If that plan had failed I had another."

"Neat. Very neat. And then you became the secretary?"

Mercer flushed in an unexpected fashion. "Certainly not!" he said with emphasis. "Do you think I would take his wages and not do the work faithfully? No, suh. I assumed to be his secretary in the office; that gave me a chance to arrange everything. But I did it to oblige him. I never touched a cent of his money. I paid, in fact, for our board

out of our own money. It would have burned my fingers, suh!"

"And the valet? Was he in your plot? Don't answer if you—"

"He was not, suh," replied Cary Mercer. "He is a right worthy fellow, and he thought, after he had seen to the tickets—which he did very carefully—and given them to me, he could go off on the little vacation which came to him by his master through me."

"That's a little bit evasive. However, I haven't the right to ask you to give away your partners, anyhow." He was peering at Mercer's face behind his glasses, but the pallid, tired features returned him no clue to the thoughts in the head above them. "What have you done with Mr. Keatcham?" he concluded suddenly.

The question brought no change of expression, and Mercer answered readily: "I put him off by himself, where he sees no one and hears nothing. I read a good deal about prisons and the most effectual way of taming men, and solitary confinement is recommended by all the authorities. His meals are handed to him by—by a mechanical device. He has electric light some of the time, turned on from the outside. He has a comfortable

room and his own shower-bath. He has comfortable meals. And he is supplied with reading."

"Reading?" repeated the colonel, his surprise in his voice.

For the first time he saw Mercer smile, but it was hardly a pleasant smile. "Yes, suh, reading," he said. "I have had type-written copies made of all the cases which I discovered in regard to his stealing our company. I reasoned that when he would get absolutely tired of himself and his own thoughts he would just naturally be *obliged* to read, and that would be ready for him. He tore up one copy."

"Hmn—I can't say I wonder. What did you do?"

"I sent him another. I expected he would do that way. After a while he will go back to it, because it will draw him. He'll hate it, but he will want to know them all. I know his nature, you see."

"What are you going to do with him?"

"Let him go, after he does what we want and promises never to molest any of us."

"But can you trust him?"

"He never breaks his word," replied Mercer indifferently, "and besides, he knows he will be

killed if he should. He isn't given to being scared, but he's scared of me, all right."

"What do you want him to do?"

"Promise to be a decenter man and to let Mr. Tracy alone in future; meanwhile, to send a wire in his secret code saying he has changed his mind. It will not surprise his crowd. He never confides in them, and he expects them to obey blindly anything in that code language. I reckon other telegrams are just for show, and they don't notice them much."

The colonel took a turn around the room to pack away this information in an orderly fashion in his mind. Mercer waited patiently; he had said truly that he was used to waiting. Perhaps he supposed that Winter was trying the case in his own mind; but in reality Rupert was seeking only one clue, as little diverted from his purpose as a bloodhound. He began to understand the man whose fixed purpose had his own quality, but sharpened by wrong and suffering. This man had not harmed Archie; as much as his warped and fevered soul could feel softer emotions, he was kindly intentioned toward the lad. Who had carried him away, then? Or was he off on his own account, really, this time? Or suppose Atkins,

the missing secretary discharged at Denver, coming back for another appeal to his employer, finding Keatcham gone, but, let one say, stumbling on some trace of mystery in his departure; suppose him to consider the chance of his having his past condoned and a rosy future given him if his suspicions should prove true and *he* should release the captive—wouldn't such a prospect spur on a man who was as cunning as he was unprincipled? Mightn't he have watched all possible clues, and mightn't he have heard about Archie and plotted to capture the child, thinking he would be easily pumped? That would presuppose that Atkins knew that Archie was at the Arnolds' or—no, he might only have seen the boy on the street; he knew him by sight; the colonel remembered that several times Archie had been with him in Keatcham's car. It was worth considering, anyhow. He spoke out of his thoughts: "Do you think Keatcham could have told the truth, and that code of his be lost or stolen? Why couldn't Atkins have stolen it? He had the chance, and he isn't hampered by principle, you say."

Mercer frowned; it was plain the possibility had its argument for him. "He might," he conceded, "but I doubt it. Why hasn't he done some-

thing with it? He hasn't. They wouldn't have postponed that meeting if he had wired his proxy and his directions in the code. He'd have voted his employer's stock. He's got too much at stake. I happen to know he thought it a sure tip to sell short, and he has put almost all he has on it. You see, Keatcham was banking on that; he knew it. He thought Atkins wouldn't dare give any of his secrets away or go against him in this deal, because they were in the same boat."

"Still, I reckon I'll have to see Keatcham."

Mercer shook his head, gently but with decision. "I hate to refuse you, Colonel, but unless you promise not to interfere, it is impossible. But I'll gladly go with you to see if we can find any trace of Archie. I'll risk that much. And if you will promise—"

"Such a promise would be impossible to an officer and a gentleman," the colonel urged lightly, smiling. "Besides, don't you see I have all the cards? I have only to call in my men. I'd hate to do it, but if you force me, you would have no chance resisting."

"We shouldn't resist, Colonel, no, suh; your force is overwhelming. But it would do no good; you couldn't find him."

"We could try; and we may be better sleuths than you imagine."

"Then it would be the worse for him; for if you find him, you will find him dead."

There was something so chilling in his level tones that Winter broke out sharply: "Are you fooling with me? Have you been such an incredible madman as to kill him already?"

Mercer's faint smile made the colonel feel boyish and impetuous. "Of course not, suh," he answered. "I told you he was alive, myself. I reckoned you knew when a man is lying and when he is telling the solemn truth. You *know* I have told you the truth and treated you on the square. But, just the same, if you try to take that man away, you'll only have his dead body. He can't do any more harm then, and a dead man can't vote."

The colonel, who had taken out his cigarette-case, opened it and meditatively fingered the rubber band. "Do you reckon," he suggested, in his most amiable voice, "do you reckon young Arnold and Endicott Tracy will stand for such frills in warfare as assassination?"

"I do not, suh," replied Mercer gravely, and as he spoke he pushed back the heavy tapestry hiding a window opposite the colonel's head, "but

they can both prove an alibi. Mr. Arnold is in Pasadena, and there goes Mr. Tracy now in his machine—to try to find Archie. Do you see?"

The colonel saw. He inclined his head, at the same time proffering his case.

"I rather think, Mr. Mercer, that I was wrong. *You* have the last trump."

CHAPTER XI

THE CHARM OF JADE

It was no false lure to distract pursuit, that hurried sentence of Randall's which had met the colonel's angry appeal for information. The woman was not only repeating Mrs. Winter's message; the message itself described a fact. As she stood at her room telephone, Aunt Rebecca had happened to glance at Randall, supplementing the perfunctory dusting of the hotel maid with her own sanitary, dampened, clean cloth; Randall's eyes suddenly glazed and bulged in such startling transformation that, instead of questioning her, Mrs. Winter stepped swiftly to the window where she was at work, to seek the cause of her agitation.

"Oh, Lord! Oh, Mrs. Winter!" gasped Randall. "Ain't *that* Master Archie?"

Mrs. Winter saw for herself; the face at a cab window, the waving of a slim hand—Archie's face, Archie's hand. Brief as was the space of his passing (for the two horses in the cab were trot-

ting smartly), she was sure of both. "Give me my bonnet," she commanded, "*any* bonnet, *any* gloves! And my bag with some money!"

It was as she flung through the door that she threw her message to the colonel back exactly as Randall had submitted it. Miss Smith was coming along the loggia. "Don't stop me!" said Mrs. Winter sternly. "I've seen Archie; I'm after him."

"Stop!" cried Miss Smith—but it was to the elevator boy who was whizzing below them in his cage, not to her employer; and she boarded the elevator with the older woman. "I'll go with you," she said. There was no vibration in her even tones, although a bright red flickered up in her cheek.

But Rebecca Winter caught savagely at her breath, which was coming fast. "It is not with the running; you needn't think it, Janet," she panted sharply, in a second. "It was the sight of his face—so suddenly; I never expected *any* face would make my heart pump like that again. All of which shows"—she was speaking quite naturally and placidly again—"that women may grow too old for men to make fools of them, but never for children. Come; it was a shabby sort of hack

he was in, drawn by two horses with auburn tails. Here's the office floor."

Not a word did Janet Smith say; she was not a woman of words in any case. Moreover, the pace which Mrs. Winter struck was too rapid for comments or questions; it swept them both past the palm-shaded *patio* into the side hall, out on the noisy, dazzling, swaying street. Looking before her, Miss Smith could see the dusty body of a hack a block away. Mrs. Winter had stepped up to a huge crimson motor-car, in the front seat of which lounged the chauffeur, his forehead and eyes hunched under his leather visor. The machine was puffing, with the engine working, ready to leap forward at a touch of the lever.

"Twenty dollars an hour if you let me get in now!" said Mrs. Winter, lightly mounting by his side as she spoke.

"Hey, me? what!" gurgled the chauffeur, plucked out of a half-doze. "Oh, say, beg your pardon, lady, but this is hired, it belongs—"

"I don't care to whom it belongs, I have to have it," announced Mrs. Winter calmly. "Whoever hired it can get another. I'll make it all right. You start on and catch that hack with the auburn-tailed horses—"

"*I'll* make it right with your fare!" Miss Smith cut in before the chauffeur could answer. "It's a case of kidnapping. You catch that cab!" She was standing on the curb, and even as she spoke an elderly man and his wife came out of a shop. They stared from her to the automobile, and in their gaze was a proprietary irritation. This was instantly transfused by a more vivid emotion. The woman looked shocked and compassionate. "Oh, pa!" she gasped, "did you hear *that?*"

The man was a country banker from Iowa. He had a very quick, keen eye; it flashed. "Case of kidnapping, hey?" snapped he, instantly grasping the character of the speakers and jumping at the situation. "Take the auto, Madam. Get a move on you, Mr. Chauffeur!"

"Oh, I'm moving, all right," called the chauffeur, as he skilfully dived his lower wheels under the projecting load of a great wagon and obliquely bumped over the edge of a street-car fender, pursued by the motorman's curses. "I see 'em, lady; I see the red tails; I'll catch 'em!"

His boast most likely had been made good (since for another block they bore straight on their course) but for an orange-wagon which had been overturned. There was a rush of pursuit of

the golden balls from the sidewalk; a policeman came to the rescue of traffic and ordered everything to halt until the cart was righted. The boys and girls in the street chased back to the sidewalk. The episode took barely a couple of minutes, but on the edge of the last minute the cab turned a corner. The motor-car turned the same corner, but saw no guiding oriflamme of waving red horsehair. The cross street next was equally bare. They were obliged to explore two adjacent highways before they came upon the hack again. This time it was in distant perspective, foreshortened to a blur of black and a swish of red. And even as they caught sight of it the horses swung round into profile and turned another corner. In the turn a man wearing a black derby hat stuck his arm and head out of the window in order to give some direction to the driver. Then he turned half around. It was almost as if he looked back at his pursuers; yet this, Mrs. Winter argued, hardly could be, since he had not expected pursuit, and anyhow, the chances were he could not know her by sight.

It was a mean street, narrow and noisome, but full of shipping traffic and barred by tramways—a heartbreaking street for a chase. The chauffeur

was a master of his art; he jumped his great craft at every vacant arm's-length; he steered it through incredibly narrow lanes; he progressed sometimes by luffs, like a boat under sail when the forward passage must be reached in such indirect fashion; but the crowd of ungainly vehicles, loaded dizzily above his head, made the superior speed of the motor of no avail. In spite of him they could see the red tails lessening. Again and yet again, the hack turned; again, but each time with a loss, the motor struck its trail. By now the street was changed; the dingy two-story buildings lining it were brightened by gold-leaf and vermilion; oriental arms and garbs and embroidery spangled the windows and oriental faces looked inscrutably out of doorways. There rose the blended odors of spice, sandalwood and uncleanliness that announce the East, reeking up out of gratings and puffing out of shops.

"Ah," said Mrs. Winter softly to herself, "Chinese quarter, is it? Well." Her eyes changed; they softened in a fashion that would have amazed one who only knew the surface of Mrs. Winter, the eccentric society potentate. She looked past the squalid, garish scene, past the shining sand-hills and the redwood trees, beyond into a stranger

landscape glowing under a blinder glare of sun. Half mechanically she lifted a tiny gold chain that had slipped down her throat under the gray gown. Raising the yellow thread and the carven jade ornament depending therefrom, she let it lie outside amid the white lace and chiffon.

"We're making good now," called the chauffeur. "Will I run alongside and hail 'em, or what?"

She told him quietly to run alongside. But her lips twitched, and when she put up her hand to press them still, she smiled to discover that the hand was bare. She had forgotten to pull on her glove. She began to pull it on now.

"The road is narrow," said she. "Run ahead of the hack and block its way. You can do it without hitting the horses, can't you?"

"Well, I guess," returned the chauffeur, instantly accomplishing the manœuver in fine style.

But he missed his deserved commendation; indeed, he forgot it himself; because, as he looked back at the horses rearing on the sudden check and tossing their auburn manes, then ran his scrutiny behind them to the hack, he perceived no life in it; and when his own passenger jumped with amazing nimbleness from her seat and flung the

crazy door wide open, she recoiled, exclaiming: "Where are they? Where did you leave them?"

"Leave who?" queried the hackman. "Say, what you stoppin' me fur? Runnin' into me with your devil-wagon! *Say!*"—then his wrath trailed into an inarticulate mutter as he appreciated better the evident quality of the gentlewoman before him.

"You may be mixed up in a penitentiary offense, my man," said she placidly. "It is a case of kidnapping. Where did you leave that boy who was in the cab? If you give us information that will find him, there's five dollars; if you fool us—well, I have your number. Where did you leave the boy?"

"Why, there was a cop with 'im—a cop and a gentleman. Ain't you got hold of the wrong party, lady?"

"A brown-haired boy in a gray suit with a blue cravat—you know he was in your cab. And how do you know it was a real policeman?"

"Or he wasn't helping on the deviltry if it was?" sneered the chauffeur, who had now become a full-fledged partizan. "Ain't you lived in this burg long enough to find out how to make a little *mazuma* on the side? You're too good for

'Frisco. Heaven is your home, my Christian friend."

"Cut it out!" retorted the man. "I guess I know how to find my way round as well as the next man—"

"Certainly you do," soothed Mrs. Winter, who was fingering a crisp new five-dollar bank-note, "and you are no kidnapper, either; you made no bargain with those men—"

"Sure I didn't," agreed the hackman, "nor I ain't standin' for kidnapping, neither. Why, I got kids of my own, and my woman she'd broom me outer the house if I was to do them games. Say, I'll tell you all I knows. They got off, them three, at that there corner, and I was to drive fast 's I could three blocks ahead and then git home any old way. And that's God's truth, I—"

"You didn't see where they went?" Mrs. Winter was quietly insistent.

"No, I didn't. I guess I was a dumb fool not ter notice, but they paid me well, and I'd a bad thirst, and I was hiking to a place I know for beer; and that's—"

"Did the boy seem willing?"

"He didn't do no kicking as I seen."

A few more questions revealed that the man

had unpacked his full kit of information. He had never seen either of the men before. The gentleman—yes, he was sure he was a gentleman; he wasn't no swell confidence guy; he was the regular thing—gentleman engaged him to take a party to the Chinese quarter; he'd tell where to stop; didn't need a guide; only wanted to make a few purchases, he said, and he knew where the things was; yes, ma'am, that was all; only down there on Market Street, or maybe—why, somewhere near by—he stuck his head out and told him to turn the corner, and then he kept telling him to turn corners, until finally he told him to stop and they got out.

Mrs. Winter gave the man the bank-note, counseling him to keep his eyes open for the two men and the boy, and to report to her at the Palace Hotel, giving his number, should he see either man or boy. It would be very well worth his while.

The chauffeur did not interrupt, but he shook his head over the departing hack. "He'd ought to have known it wan't on the square, but these hack drivers ain't got good sense even when they're, so to speak, sober, which ain't often," he soliloquized. "Well, lady, if they've took to the Chi-

nese quarter, we'd better be looking up a Chink to help us, I guess. I know a fairly decent one—"

"I think I know a better," interrupted Mrs. Winter, with a faint smile. She had detected a suppressed pity in the man's regard. "Motor slowly along the street. There is a shop, if I can find it, where there ought to be a man—"

"Man you know? Say, lady, I guess I better go in with you, if you don't mind—"

"No; stay in your car. You don't know how safe I am. Not only my gray hair protects me, but I have only to say a few words and any of these men will fight for me if necessary. But this is in confidence—just between us, you understand. You are not to repeat it, ever."

She looked at him with a frank smile, and involuntarily his hand went up to his cap. "What you say goes, lady. But jest remember I'm right here, spark going all the time, ready to throw her wide open when you step in; and"—his voice sank—"I ain't absolutely unprepared for a scrap, either."

"I understand," said she, looking at him keenly, and a few moments later she stepped briskly into the shop before which he halted with a little lightening of the heart because of this un-

couth knight of the lever. The shop itself was like any one of a score on the street, crowded with oriental objects, bizarre carvings of ivory and jade, daggers and strings of cash, swords, gorgeous embroidered robes of silk and gold in a huddle over a counter or swinging and gleaming in the dusky background, squat little green and brown gods with puffy eyelids, smiling inscrutably amid shoes and fans and Chinese lanterns of glass and bronze, glittering with beads—in all these, like the score about it; yet the clean windows and a certain order within gave it a touch out of the common. A man and a boy served the shop, both in the American dress, with their pigtails tucked under visorless caps. Both greeted her in the serene oriental fashion, bowing and smiling, their obsequious courtesy showing no smallest sign of the surprise which the sight of an unattended woman must have given them.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Winter was aware that both, under their lowered eyelids, took cognizance of that soft-carven disk of jade among the laces on her breast. She asked the man if he had seen a lad and an older man, or it might be two older men, one a policeman, come into that or any other neighboring shop. She explained that the lad was

her grand-nephew and was lost (she eschewed the harsher word, for she had no desire to set afloat a rumor which might bring the police upon her). She named a sum large enough to kindle a sudden gleam in the boy's eyes, as the reward awaiting the lucky man who might put her on the right track. But her words struck no responsive spark from the Chinaman's veiled gaze. In perfect English and a very soft voice he avowed ignorance and sympathy with the same breath.

And all the while she could feel his glance slant down at the jade ornament.

"Send the boy to look in the shop next door," said she. As she spoke she raised the charm between her thumb and first two fingers, looking at him directly. Her tone was that of command, not request. He frowned very slightly, making an almost imperceptible gesture, to which she returned a single Chinese phrase, spoken so low that had he not expected the words they had been indistinguishable to his ear. Instantly he addressed the boy rapidly in their own language. The boy went out. The master of the shop returned to Mrs. Winter. His manner had utterly changed; the tradesman's perfunctory deference was displaced by an almost eager humility of bearing. He would

have her sit—there were a few cane-seated American arm-chairs, in grotesque contrast to all their accompaniments—he prostrated himself before her; he put himself at her service; still to her trained eye there was a corner of his mind where incredulity wrestled with a stronger emotion.

"Do not fear," she said gently. "It is really my own, and he gave it to me himself, almost thirty years ago. He was hardly thirty years old himself then. You see, my husband had been so fortunate as to do him a kindness. It was he who had it first. When he died it came to me, and now for the second time in my life I am using it. I knew you belonged. I saw the sign. Will you help me find my boy?"

"Did your ladyship know *he* is he'e, in San Flancisco?"

If she had not already dissipated any doubt in his mind, her evident relief blew the last shred away now. "Haven't you such a thing as a telephone somewhere?" cried Rebecca Winter. "Time is precious. Can't you speak to him—have him come here?"

It appeared that there was a telephone, and in a moment she was put into communication by the shopkeeper. He stood in an attitude of deep re-

spect while she talked. He heard with unsmiling attention her first Chinese words; he listened as she returned to English, speaking very quietly, but with a controlled earnestness, explaining that she was Archibald Winter's widow, giving dates and places, in nowise alluding to the service which had won the charm about her neck. Yet as he listened, insensibly the Chinaman grew certain that she had spoken the truth. Presently she turned to him. "He wishes to speak to you," she said, and went back to the shop. She sighed as one sighs from whose heart a great burden rolls. "To find him here, and still grateful!" she was thinking. "What wonderful good fortune!"

She sat down, and her face grew dreamy. She was no longer thinking of Archie. Her vision was on another face, another scene, a time of peril, when almost against her reason her instinctive woman's recoil of pity for a fellow-creature in danger of unthinkable torture had been so intense that she had more than acquiesced in her husband's plan of risking both their lives to save him; she had impelled him to it; she had overcome his terror of the risks on her account. "It is only death we have to fear, at worst," she had argued. "We have the means to escape in a second, both

of us, from anything else; and if we run away and leave this poor wretch, who hasn't done anything but love his country, just as we love ours, and be too civilized for his trifling, orriery, pusillanimous country-people to understand, to get slashed to pieces by their horrible ling-ling—whatever they call it—Archibald Winter, don't you reckon we shall have nightmares as long as we live?"

Thirty years ago—yet it seemed like yesterday. Distinctly she could hear her husband's voice; it had not come back to her with such reality for years; it was more real than the cries of the street outside; and her heart was beating faster for his words: "Becky, there never was a woman like you! You could make a dead man hop up and fight, bless you!"

"Your ladyship"—it was the shopkeeper back again; he had lived in England, and he offered the most respectful western title of his knowledge —"your ladyship may be chee'ful. All will be done of the best. The young gentleman will be back fo' to-night. If your ladyship will now le-tu'n to the hotel."

Mrs. Winter bowed slightly; she was quite her self-possessed self again. "I will go certainly,"

It took only a moment to transfer a passenger. Page 211

she said, "but I shall hope to see you, also, to-night; and meanwhile, will you accept, as a token from a friend who trusts you, *this?*" She took a little gem-encrusted watch from her fob and handed it to him. Her manner was that of a queen who rewards her general. And she left him bowing low. She entered the motor-car. It was no longer a lone motor. Another car steamed and snorted near by, in which sat the amiable banker from Iowa, his wife and Janet Smith.

It took only a moment to transfer a passenger, to explain that she hoped to find the boy who had been lost—no, she would not use such a strenuous word as kidnapped—and would they complete their kindness by not mentioning the affair to any one? One hated so to get into the papers. And would they let her see them again to thank them? Then, as she sank back on the cushions, she remarked, as much to the expectant chauffeur as to Janet: "Yes, I think it is all right. I think we shall see Archie to-night."

CHAPTER XII

A BLOW

There was no one but Mrs. Winter to welcome the colonel when, jaded, warm and dusty, he tapped on Aunt Rebecca's parlor door. Mrs. Millicent was bristling with a sense of injury; one couldn't touch her conversationally without risk of a scratch. The colonel put up the shield of his unsuitable appearance, his fatigue and his deplorable need of a bath, and escaped into his own apartment. But he made his toilet with reckless haste. All the time he was questioning his recent experience, trying to sort over his theories, which had been plunged into confusion by Mercer's confession. "I suppose," he reflected, "that I had no right to give Mercer that hint at the door." The hint had been given just as they parted. It was in a single sentence:

"By the way, Mercer, if that pillar in the *patio* is of importance in your combination, you would better keep an eye on it; it has a trick of cracking."

"The devil it has!" grunted Mercer. Then he

thanked him, with a kind of reluctant admiration in his tone.

"You are sure you don't object to my detective's staying?" questioned the colonel.

"No, suh; prefer to have him. You told him to have his men in and overhaul the house?"

"I did. I warned you I should have to. You promise there shall be no racket? But I—I think I'll take Haley."

"Thank you. That's right kind of you, suh. Good-by, suh."

This had been the manner of their parting—assuredly a singular one, after the sinister suspicions and the violent promises which the soldier had made himself in regard to this very man. After leaving, he had motored into town, down to the police courts, to discover no records of the arrest and no trace of Archie. Thence, discouraged, perplexed and more worried than he liked to admit, he had repaired to the hotel. His aunt was gone, Miss Smith was gone, and Randall could only relate how Mrs. Winter "had flewed like a bird, sir, into a big red motor-car and gone off, and then Miss Smith and a lady and gentleman had got into a white car and gone off in the same direction."

He was meditating on his next step, when Birdsall was announced below. The detective looked as warm and as tired as the colonel had felt an hour before. Rupert was not eager to see him, but neither was he anxious for the tête-à-tête with Millicent which awaited him in the parlor. Between the two he chose Birdsall.

"Well," he greeted him, "did you find any trace of the boy?"

"Of course I did," growled Birdsall. "They didn't try to hide 'im. They had him lodged in a dandy room with his own bath. Of course, he left his tooth-brush. They'd got him some automobile togs, too, and he'd left some leggings when he packed, and a letter begun on a pad to Miss Smith—'Dear Miss Janet,' it begins, 'I am having a bully time. I can steer the machine, only I can't back'—that's all. Say, the young dog has been having it fat while we were in the frying-pan for fear somebody was bothering him."

"But he is not in the house now?"

"No, nor nothing else."

"*Nobody* hidden away? Where did the groans you heard come from?" queried the colonel politely.

Birdsall flushed. "I do believe that slick de-

ceiver you call Mercer put up a game on us out of meanness—just to git me guessing."

"That sort of thing looks more like the college boys."

"Say, it might have been. This thing is giving me nervous prostration. Say, why didn't you see the thing out with me?"

The colonel shamelessly told the truth to deceive. "I was called here. I was told that Mrs. Winter, my aunt, had seen Archie in the street."

"She was just getting out of a machine as I came up. Miss Smith was with her, and they had their hands full of candy boxes. They were laughing. I made sure the boy had been found."

"Not to my knowledge," said the colonel. But in some excitement he walked into the parlor. The ladies had arrived; they stood in the center of the room while Randall took away the boxes.

"Candy for Archie," explained Aunt Rebecca, and these were the first words to reach Rupert Winter's ears. "I expect him to dinner."

"Aunt Rebecca," proclaimed Millicent, "I never have been one to complain, but there *are* limits to human endurance. I am a modern person, a civilized Episcopalian, accustomed to a regular and well-ordered life, and for the last few days I seem

to have been living in a kind of medieval mystery, with kidnappers, and blood-stains, and, for anything I know, somebody ready to stick a knife into any one of us any time! You people may enjoy this sort of thing—*you seem to*—but I don't. And I tell you frankly that I am going to apply to the police, not to any private detective inquiry office, as like as not in league with the criminals" —thus ungratefully did Mrs. Millicent slur the motives of her only truly interested auditor—"but *real* policemen. I shall apply—"

She did not tell where she should apply, the words being snapped out of her mouth by the sharp tinkle of the telephone bell.

Aunt Rebecca responded to the call. "Send him up," was her answer to the inaudible questioner.

She laid down the receiver. Then she put it back. Then she stood up, her silver head in the air, her erect little figure held motionless.

Janet Smith's dark eyes sought hers; her lips parted only to close firmly again.

Even the detective perceived the electric intensity of the moment, and Rupert shut his fists tight, with a quickened beating of the heart; but emotional vibrations did not disturb Mrs. Melville Winter's poise. She continued her plaint.

"This present situation is unbearable, unprecedented and un—un—unexpected," she declaimed, rather groping for a climax which escaped her. Aunt Rebecca raised her hand.

"Would you be so very kind, Millicent," said she, "as to wait a moment? I am trying to listen."

Like a response to her words, the knob of the door was turned, the door swung, and Archie entered the room, smiling his odd little chewed-up smile.

Janet uttered a faint cry and took a single step, but, as if recognizing a superior right, hung back while the boy put his arm about his great-aunt's waist and rather bashfully kissed her cheek.

She received the salute with entire composure, except for a tiny splash of red which crept up to each cheek-bone. "Is it really you, Archie?" said she. "You are a little late for dinner day before yesterday, but quite in time for to-day. Sit down and tell us where you have been."

"Quite so!" exclaimed Mrs. Millicent. "Good heavens! Do you know how we have suffered? *Where* have you been? *Why* did you run away?"

But Archie, who had surrendered one-half of him to be hugged by Miss Smith and the other to be clapped on the shoulder by his uncle, seemed

to think a vaguely polite "How-de-do, Aunt Millicent; I'm sorry to have worried you!" to be answer enough. Only when the question was repeated by Mrs. Winter herself did he reply: "I'm awfully sorry, Aunt Rebecca, but I've promised not to say anything about it. But, truly, I didn't mean to bother you."

Millicent exploded in an access of indignation: "And do you mean that you expect us to accept such a ridiculous promise—after all we have been through?"

"Quite so," remarked Aunt Rebecca, with a precise echo of her niece's most Anglican utterance—the gift of mimicry had been one of Mrs. Winter's most admired and distrusted social gifts from her youth.

Rupert Winter hastened to distract Millicent's attention by saying decisively: "If the boy has promised, that ends it; he can't break his parole. Anyhow, they don't seem to have hurt you, old son?"

"Oh, they treated me dandy, those fellows," said Archie. "Miss Janet, I know how to run an electric motor-car, except backing."

"I'll bet you do," muttered the detective.

Here the colonel came to the boy's relief a sec-

ond time and drew Birdsall aside. "Best let me pump the chap a little. You get down-stairs and see how he got here, who brought him. They'll get clean away. It is late for that as it is. You can report to-morrow."

It was the colonel, also, who eliminated Mrs. Millicent by the masterly stratagem of suggesting that she pass the news to Mrs. Wigglesworth. He artfully added that it would require tact to let the lady from Boston understand that the lad had been found without in any way gratifying her natural curiosity in regard to the manner of finding or the cause of disappearance. "I'll have to leave *that* to you," he concluded. "Maybe you can see a way out; I confess my hands are in the air."

Millicent thus relegated to the ambassador's shelf, the colonel slipped comfortably into his pet arm-chair facing his nephew on the lounge between Aunt Rebecca and Miss Smith. Miss Smith looked frankly, charmingly happy. Aunt Rebecca looked rather tired.

"Of course," remarked he, "I understand, old man, that you have promised secrecy to—well, to the Fireless Stove gang, as we'll call them; but the *other* kidnappers, the crowd that held up your car and then switched you off on a side track while

young Fireless was detained—they haven't any hold on you?"

"No, sir," said Archie; "but—you see, that strange gentleman and Aunt Millicent—I was scared lest I'd give something away."

"They're not here now. All friends here. Suppose you make a clean breast of your second kidnapping. It may be important you should."

Nothing loath, Archie told his story. Left outside while Tracy went into the office with a policeman, to whom he gave his assumed name, he remained for hardly two minutes before a gentleman and a "cop" came up to him, and the latter ordered him to descend from the machine—but not until they had found it impossible to move the vehicle. When they did discover that the key was out and gone, the man in citizen's clothes hailed a cab and the officer curtly informed Archie that Gardiner (Tracy's traveling name) had been taken to another court and he was to follow. He didn't suspect anything beyond a collision with the speed regulations of the city, but had he seen a chance to dive under his escort's arm the boy would have taken it. Such chance was not afforded him, and all he was able to do was to lean out suddenly as they passed the Palace and to

wave at Randall. "I wanted them to stop and let me get some one to pay my fine," said Archie, "but they said I was only a witness. They wouldn't let me stop; they run down the curtain —at least so far as it would run. It was like all those hack curtains, you know—all out of order."

"Archie," the colonel interjected here, "was one of the men a little fellow, clean-shaven, with a round black head, blue eyes—one of his eyes winks a little faster than the other?"

"Yes, sir. How did you know?"

"I didn't know; I guessed. Well, get on; they wanted to pump you when they got you safely out of sight?"

"Yes," Archie said, "they put me into the sweat-box, all right."

"Did you tell them anything?" asked Mrs. Winter.

Archie looked at her reproachfully. Did she think that he had gone to boarding-school for nothing? He explained that, being a stranger in the town, he could not tell anything about where he'd been. There was an agent at the house trying to sell stoves, and they let him take him off back to the hotel. The man seemed to know all about who he (Archie) was, and about his having gone

away. The men asked him an awful lot of questions about how he was taken away. He said he didn't know, and he'd promised not to tell. He couldn't tell. They said he would have to go to jail if he didn't tell, because the men who had him were such bad men. But he didn't tell.

"Did they try to frighten you—to make you tell?" said Mrs. Winter.

"Oh, they bluffed a little," returned Archie carelessly, yet the keen eyes on him—eyes both worldly-wise and shrewd—noted that the lad's color shifted and he winced the least in the world over some remembrance.

"But they didn't hurt you? They didn't burn you or cut you or twist your arms, or try any other of their playful ways?" Mrs. Winter demanded; and Janet began feeling the boy's arms, breathing more quickly. The colonel only looked.

"No, they didn't do a thing. I knew they wouldn't, too," Archie assured her earnestly. "I told them if they did anything, Uncle Rupert and you would make them pay."

"And you weren't frightened, away from every one—in that hideous quarter?" cried Miss Smith. "Oh, my dear!" She choked.

"Well, maybe I was a little scared. I kept think-

ing of a rotten yarn of Kipling's; something happened to *him,* down in the underground quarter, in just such a hot, nasty-smelling hole, I guess, as I was in; you remember, Miss Janet, about the game of cards and the Mexican stabbing a Chink for cheating, and how Kipling jumped up and ran for his life, never looked around; and don't you remember that nasty bit, how he felt sure they had dealt with the greaser their own way and he'd never get up to the light again—"

"I've been remembering that story all this afternoon," answered Miss Smith with a shudder.

"Agreeable little tale," said Aunt Rebecca dryly. "Archie, you must have had a right nasty quarter of an hour; what stopped it?"

"Why, a Chink came and called the little man off; and there was a lot of talking which I couldn't hear, and the cop was swearing; I think they didn't like it. But, in a minute the Chinaman—he was an awful nice little feller—he came up to me and took me out, led me all sorts of ways, not a bit like the way I came in, and got me out to the street. The other fellows were very polite; they told me that they were my friends and only wanted to find a clue to my kidnappers; and the burning holes in me was only a joke to give me

an excuse to break my word under compulsion—why, *they* wouldn't hurt me for the world! I pretended to be fooled, and said it was all right, and looked pleasant; but—I'd like to scare them the same way, once, all the same."

The boy caught at his lip which was trembling, and ended with a shaky laugh. Miss Smith clenched the fist by her side; but she dropped the arm near Archie, and said in a matter-of-fact, sprightly tone: "Archie, you really ought to go dress—and wash for dinner; excuse me for mentioning it, but you have no idea how grimy you are."

The commonplace turn of thought did its errand. Archie, who had been bracing himself anew against the horror which he remembered, dropped back into his familiar habits and jumped up consciously. "It's the dust, motoring," he offered bashfully. "I ought to have washed before I came up. Well, that's all; we came straight here. Now, may I go take a bath?"

Aunt Rebecca was fingering a curious jade locket on her neck. She watched the boy run to the open door.

"I wish you'd go into your room, Colonel," said Miss Smith, "and see that nothing happens

to him. It's silly, but I am expecting to see him vanish again!"

The sentence affected the colonel unpleasantly; why need she be posing before him, as if that first disappearance had had any real fright in it? Of course she didn't know yet (although Aunt Rebecca might have told her—she *ought* to have told her and stopped this unnecessary deceit) that he was on to the game; but—he didn't like it. Unconsciously, his inward criticism made his tone drier as he replied with a little bow that he imagined Archie was quite safe, now, and he would ask to be excused, as he had to attend to something before dinner.

Was it his fancy that her face changed and her eyes looked wistful? It must have been. He walked stiffly away. Hardly had he entered his room and turned his mind on the changed situation before the telephone apprised him that a gentleman, Mr. Gardiner, who represented the Fireless Cook Stove, said that he had an appointment with Colonel Winter to explain the stove; should he be sent up?

Directly, Endicott Tracy entered, smiling. "Where's the kid? I know he's back," were his first words; and he explained that he had been

hunting the kidnappers to no purpose. "Except that I learned enough to know they put up a job with the justice, all right; I got next to that game without any Machiavellian exertions. But they got away. Who is it? Any of Keatcham's gang?"

"Atkins," said the colonel concisely.

Tracy whistled and apologized. "It's a blow," he confessed. "That little wretch! He has brains to burn and not an ounce of conscience. You know he has been mousing round at the hotels after Keatcham's mail—"

"He didn't get it?"

"No, Cary had covered that point. Cary has thought this all out very carefully, but Atkins has got on to the fact that Cary was here in this hotel with Keatcham. But he doesn't know where we come in; whether Keatcham's gang is just lying low for some game of its own, or whether *we've* got him. At least, I don't believe he knows."

"You ought not to be talking so freely to me; I haven't promised you anything, you know," warned the colonel.

"But you've got your nephew back all right; we have been on the square with *you;* why should you butt in? I know you won't."

"I don't seem to have a fair call to," observed the colonel.

"And I think the old boy is going to give in; he has made signals of distress, to my thinking. Wanted his mail; and wanted to write; and informed Cary—he saw him for the first time to-day—that he had bigger things on deck than the Midland; and wanted to get at them. We're going to win out all right."

"Unless Atkins gets at him to-night," the colonel suggested. "You oughtn't to have come here, Gardiner. Don't go home, now. Wait until later, and let me rig you up in another lot of togs and give you my own motor-car. Better."

Tracy was more than impressed by the proposal; he was plainly grateful. He entered with enthusiasm into the soldier's masquerade—Tracy had always had a weakness for theatricals and some of his Hasty Pudding *Portraits of Unknown People We Know* had won him fame at Cambridge. Ten minutes later, there sat opposite the colonel a florid-faced, mustached, western commercial traveler whose plaided tweeds, being an ill-advised venture of Haley's which the colonel had taken off his hands and found no subject of charity quite obnoxious enough to deserve them,

naturally did not fit the present wearer, but suited his inane complacence of bearing and might pass for a bad case of ready-made purchase.

"Now," said the adviser, "I'll notify Haley to have my own hired motor ready for you and you can slip out and take it after you've had something to eat. Here's the restaurant card. Haley will be there. Leave it at the drug store on Van Ness Street—Haley will give you the number—and get home as unobtrusively as possible. You can peel off these togs in the motor if necessary. You've your own underneath except your coat. Wrap that in a newspaper and carry it. I don't know that Atkins has any one on guard at the hotel, but I think it more than likely he suspects some connection between our party and Keatcham's. But first, tell me about Atkins; what do you know about him? It's an American name."

"America can take all the glory of him, I fancy," said Tracy. "He's been Keatcham's secretary for six years. He seems awfully mild and useful and timid. He's not a bit timid. He's full of resource; he's sidled suggestions into Keatcham's ear and has been gradually working to make himself absolutely necessary. I think he aimed at a part-

nership; but Keatcham wouldn't stand for it. I think it was in revenge that he sold out some of Keatcham's secrets. Cary got on to that and has a score of his own to settle with him, besides. I don't know how he managed, but he showed him up; and Keatcham gave him the sack in his own cold-blooded way. I know him only casually. But my cousin, Ralph Schuyler, went to prep. school with him, so I got his character straight off the bat. His father was a patent-medicine man from Mississippi, who made a fair pile, a couple of hundred thousand which looked good to that section, you know. I don't know anything about his people except that his father made the 'Celebrated Atkins' Ague Busters'; and that Atkins was ashamed of his people and shook his married sisters who came to see him, in rather a brutal fashion; but I know a thing or two about him; he was one of those bounders who curry favor with the faculty and the popular boys and never break rules apparently, but go off and have sly little bats by themselves. He never was popular, yet, somehow, he got into things; he knew where to lend money; and he was simply sickeningly clever; in math. he was a wonder. Ralph hated him. For one thing, he caught him in a

dirty lie. Atkins hated him back and contrived to prevent his being elected class president, and when he couldn't prevent Ralph's making his senior society the happy thought struck Atkins to get on the initiation committee. They had a cheery little branding game to make the fellows quite sure they belonged, you know, and he rammed his cigar stump into Ralph's arm so that Ralph had blood-poisoning and a narrow squeak for his life. You see that I'm not prepossessed in the fellow's favor. He's got too vivid an imagination for me!"

"Seems to have," acquiesced the colonel.

"I think, you know"—Tracy made an effort to be just—"I think Atkins was rather soured. Some of the fellows made fun of the 'Ague Busters'; he had a notion that the reason it was such uphill work for him in the school, was his father's trade. No doubt he did get nasty licks, at first; and he's revengeful. He hasn't got on in society outside, either—this he lays to his not being a university man. You see his father lost some of his money and put him to work instead of in college. He was willing enough at the time—I think he wanted to get married—but afterward, when he was getting a good salary and piling up money on his tips, he began to think that

he had lost more than he had bargained for. Altogether, he's soured. Now, what he wants is to make a thundering big strike and to pull out of Wall Street, buy what he calls 'a seat on the James' and set up for a Southern gentleman. He's trying to marry a Southern girl, they say, who is kin to the Carters and the Byrds and the Lees and the Carys—why, *you* know her, she's Mrs. Winter's secretary."

"Does—does she care for him?" The colonel suddenly felt his mouth parched; he was savagely conscious of his mounting color. What a fiendish trick of fate! he had never dreamed of this! Well, whether she cared for him or not, the man was a brute; he shouldn't get her. That was one certainty in the colonel's mind.

"Why, Cary vows she doesn't, that it was only a girlish bit of nonsense up in Virginia, that time he was prospecting, you know. But I don't feel so safe. She's too nice for such a cur. But you know what women are; the nicest of them seem to be awfully queer about men. There's no betting on them."

"I'm afraid not," remarked the colonel lightly. But he put his fingers inside his collar and loosened it, as if he felt choked.

Because he had a dozen questions quarreling for precedence in his head, he asked not one. He only inquired regarding the situation; discovering that both Mercer and Tracy were equally in the dark with himself as to Atkins' plans, Atkins' store of information, Atkins' resources. How he could have waylaid Tracy and the boy without knowing whence they came was puzzling; it was quite as puzzling, however, assuming that he did know their whereabouts, to decide why he was so keen to interrogate the boy. In fact, it was, as Tracy said, "too much like Professor Santa Anna's description of a German definition of metaphysics, 'A blind man hunting in a dark room for a black cat that isn't there.' "

"In any event, you would better keep away from *me*," was the colonel's summing up of the situation; "I don't want to be inhospitable, but the sooner you are off, and out of the hotel, the safer for your speculation."

"Friends will please accept the intimation," said Tracy good-humoredly. "Very well, it's twenty-three for me. I'm hoping you'll see your way clear to run over as soon as the old man has surrendered; I'm going to invite him to make us a proper visit, then, and see the country. I'm al-

ways for letting the conquered keep their side-arms."

He went away smiling his flashing smile, and turned it up at the hotel as he walked out; the colonel made no sign of recognition from the window whence he observed him. Instead, he drew back quickly, frowning; it might be a mere accident that only a hand's-breadth of space from the young Harvard man was a dapper little shape in evening clothes, a man still young, with a round black head; if so, it was an accident not to the colonel's liking.

"Damn you!" whispered Rupert Winter very softly. "What is your little game?"

At once he descended, having telephoned Haley to meet him at the court. When he entered and sent his glance rapidly among the little tables, by this time filled with diners, he experienced a disagreeable surprise. It did not come from the sight of Sergeant Haley in his Sunday civilian clothes, stolidly reading the *Call;* it came from a vision of Atkins standing, bowing, animatedly talking with Janet Smith.

Instead of approaching Haley, Winter fell back and scribbled a few words on a page of his note-book, while safely shielded by a great palm. The

note he despatched to Haley, who promptly joined him. While they stood, talking on apparently indifferent subjects, Miss Smith passed them. Whether because he was become suspicious or because she had come upon him suddenly, she colored slightly. But she smiled as she saluted him and spoke in her usual tranquil tone. "You are going to dine with us, aren't you, Colonel?" said she. "I think dinner is just about to be served."

The colonel would be with them directly.

Haley's eyes followed her; he had returned her nod and inquiry for his wife and little Nora with a military salute and the assurance that they were both wonderfully well and pleased with the country.

"Sure, ain't it remarkable the way that lady do keep names in her mind?" cried he. "An' don't she walk foine and straight? Oi've been always towld thim Southern ladies had the gran' way wid 'em; Oi see now 'tis thrue." The unusual richness of Haley's brogue was a sure sign of feeling. The colonel only looked grim. After he had taken Haley to a safe nook for his confidence, a nook where there were neither ears nor eyes to be feared, he would have made his way up-stairs;

but half-way down the office he was hailed by the manager. The manager was glad to hear that the young gentleman was safely back. He let the faint radiance of an intelligent, respectfully tactful smile illumine his words and intimate that his listener would have no awkward questions to parry from him. The colonel felt an ungrateful wrath, a reprehensible snare of temper which did not show in his confidentially lowered voice, as he replied: "Mighty lucky, too, we are; the boy's all right; but San Francisco is no place for an innocent kid even to take the safest-looking walk. What sort of a police system have you, anyhow?"

The manager shook his head. "I'm not bragging about it; nor about the Chinese quarter, either. I confess I've felt particularly uncomfortable, myself, the last day. Well—if you'll excuse the advice—least said, you know."

The colonel nodded. He proffered his cigar-case; the manager complimented its contents, as he selected a cigar; and both gentlemen bowed. A wandering, homesick Frenchman, who viewed their parting, felt refreshed as by a breath from his own land of admirable manners. Meanwhile, the colonel was fuming within: "Confound his insinuating curiosity! but I reckon I headed him

off. And who would have thought," he wondered forlornly, "that I could be going to dine with the boy safe and sound and be feeling so like a whipped hound!"

But none of this showed during the dinner at which Millicent was in high good humor, having obtained information about most astounding bargains in the Chinese quarter from Mrs. Wigglesworth. Her good humor extended even to Miss Smith, who received it without enthusiasm, albeit courteously; and who readily consented to be her companion for the morning sally on the distressed Orientals, whose difficulties with the customs had reduced them to the necessity of sales at any cost. Aunt Rebecca listened with an absent smile, while Archie laughed at every feeblest joke of his uncle in a boyish interest so little like his former apathy that often Miss Smith's eyes brightened and half timidly sought the uncle's, as if calling his attention to the change. Only a few hours back, his would have brightened gratefully in answer; now, he avoided her glances. Yet somehow, his heart felt heavier when they ceased. For his part, he was thankful to have his aunt request his company in a little promenade around the "loggia," as she termed it, overlooking the great court.

She took him aside to tell him her afternoon experience, and to ask his opinion of the enigmatical appearance of Atkins. He was strongly tempted, in return, to question her frankly about Miss Smith, to tell her of seeing the latter with Atkins only that evening. He knew that it was the sensible thing to do—but he simply could not do it. To frame his suspicions past or present of the woman he loved; to discuss the chances of her affection for a man loathsomely unworthy of her; worse, to balance the possibilities of her turning betrayer in her turn and chancing any damage to her benefactress and her kinsman for this fellow's sake—no, it was beyond him. He had intended to discuss his aunt's part in the waylaying of Keatcham, with calmness and with the deference due her, but unsparingly; he meant to show her the legal if not moral obliquity of her course, to point out to her the pitfalls besetting it, to warn her how hideous might be the consequences of a misstep. Somehow, however, his miserable new anxiety about Miss Smith had disturbed all his calculations and upset his wits; and he could not rally any of the poignant phrases which he had prepared. All he was able to say was something about the rashness of the business;

it was like the Filipinos with their bows and arrows fighting machine-guns.

"Or David with his ridiculous little sling going against Goliath," added she. "Very well put, Bertie; only the good advice comes too late; the question now is, how to get out with a whole skin. Surprising as it may be, I expect to—with your help."

"Honored, I'm sure," growled Bertie.

"There is one thing I meant to ask you—I haven't, but I shall now. Instead of making it impossible for me to sleep to-night, as you virtuously intended in order to clear your conscience before you tried to pull me out of the trap I've set for myself, suppose you do me a favor, right now."

"You put it so well, you make me ashamed of my moral sense, Aunt Becky; what is it you want?"

"Oh, nothing unbefitting a soldier and a gentleman, dear boy; just this: Cary has to have some money. I meant to give it to Stoves, but you hustled him off in such a rush that I didn't get at him. You know where he is, don't you? You haven't sent him straight back?"

"I can find him, I reckon."

"Then I'll give *you* the money, at once."

How weak a thing is man! Here was an eminently cool-headed, reasonable man of affairs who knew that paws which had escaped from the fire unsinged had no excuse to venture back for other people's chestnuts; he had expressed himself clearly to this effect to young Tracy; now, behold him as unable to resist the temptation of a conflict and the chance to baffle Atkins as if he were a hot-headed boy in plain shoulder-straps!

"I'll do better for you, Aunt Rebecca," said he. "I'll not only take Fireless the money, I'll go with him to the house. I can make a sneak from here; and Atkins is safely down-stairs at this moment. He may be shadowing Fireless; if he is, perhaps I can throw him off the track."

Thus it befell that not an hour later Rupert Winter was guiding the shabby and noisy runabout a second time toward the haunted house.

"Nothing doin'," said the joyous apprentice to crime; "I called old Cary up and got a furious slating for doing it; but he said there wasn't a watch-dog in sight; and the old man had surrendered. He was going to let him into the library on parole."

"You need a guardian," growled the colonel;

"where did you telephone? *Not* in the drug store?"

"Oh, dear, no, not in such a public place; I've a shrinking nature that never did intrude its private, personal affairs on the curious world. I used the 'phone of that nice quiet little restaurant where they gave me a lovely meal but were so long preparing it, I used up all the literature in sight, which was the *Ladies' Home Journal* and a tract on the virtues of Knox's Gelatine. When I couldn't think of anything else to do I routed out Cary—I'd smoked all my cigarettes and all my cigars but one which I was keeping for after dinner. And Cary rowed me good and plenty. There wasn't a soul in the room."

"Has any one followed you?"

"Not a man, woman or child, not even a yellow dog. I kept looking round, too."

"It was a dreadfully risky thing to do; you don't deserve to escape; but perhaps you did. Atkins may have come to the Palace for some other purpose and never have noticed you."

"My own father wouldn't have got on to me in that dinky rig."

Winter was not so easy in his mind. But he hoped for the best, since there was nothing else

for him to do. They were in sight of the house now, which loomed against the dim horizon, darker, grimmer than ever. Where the upper stories were pierced with semicircular arches, the star-sown sky shone through with an extraordinary effect of depth and mystery. All the lighter features of the architecture, carving on pediment or lintel or archivolt, delicate iron tracery of *rejas,* relief of arcature and colonnade—all these the dusk blurred if it did not obliterate; the great dark bulk of the house with its massive buttresses, its pyramidal copings and receding upper stories, was the more boldly silhouetted on the violet sky; yet because of the very flatness of the picture, the very lack of shadow and projection, it seemed unsubstantial, hardly more of reality than the giant shadow it cast upon the hillside. Electric lights wavered and bristled dazzling beams on either side of the street; not a gleam, red, white or yellow, leaked through the shuttered windows of the house. In its blackness, its silence, its determined isolation it renewed, but with a greater force, the first sinister thrill which the sight of it had given the man who came to rifle it of its secrets.

"Lonesome-looking old shanty, isn't it?" said

the Harvard boy; "seems almost indecorous to speak out loud. Here's where we *cache* the car and make a gentle detour by aid of the shrubbery up the arroyo to the north side of the *patio*. See?"

He directed the colonel's course through an almost imperceptible opening in the hedge along sharp turns and oblique and narrow ways into a small vacant space where the vines covered an adobe hut. Jumping out, Tracy unlocked the door of this tiny building so that the colonel could run the car inside; and after Winter had emerged again, he re-locked the door. As there was no window, the purpose of the hut was effectually concealed.

"Very neat," the colonel approved; whereat Tracy flashed his smile at him in the moonlight and owned with ingenuous pride that he himself was the contriver of this reticent garage.

From this point he took the lead. Neither spoke. They toiled up the hill, in this part of the grounds less of the nature of a hill than of an arroyo or ravine through which rocks had thrust their rugged sides and over which spiked semi-tropical cacti had sprawled, and purple and white flowered vines had made their own untended tangle. Before they reached the level the colonel

was breathing hard, every breath a stab. Tracy, a famous track man who had won his H in a wonderful cross-country run, felt no distress—until he heard his companion gasp.

"Jove! But that hill's fierce!" he breathed explosively. "Do you mind resting a minute?"

"Hardly,"—the colonel was just able to hold his voice steady—"I have a Filipino bullet in my leg somewhere which the X-ray has never been able to account for; and I'm not exactly a mountain goat!"

"Why, of course, I'm a brute not to let you run up the drive in the machine. Not a rat watching us to-night, either; but I wanted you to see the place; and you seem so fit—"

"You oughtn't to give away your secrets to me, an outsider—"

"You're no outsider; I consider you the treasurer of the band," laughed Tracy. They had somehow come to an unexpressed but perfectly understood footing of sympathy. The colonel even let the younger man help him up the last stiff clamber of the path. He forgot his first chill, as of a witness approaching a tragedy; there was a smile on his lips when the two of them passed into the *patio*. It lingered there as he stood in the

flower-scented gloom. It was there as Tracy stumbled to a half-remembered push-button, wondering aloud what had become of Cary and Kito that they shouldn't have answered his whistle; it was there, still, when Tracy slipped, and grumbled: "What sticky stuff has Kito spilled on this floor?" —and instantly flooded the court with light. Then—he saw the black, slimy pool and the long slide of Tracy's nailed sole in it; and just to one side, almost pressing against his own foot, he saw a man in a gray suit huddled into the shape of a crooked U, with his arms limp at his side and his head of iron-gray fallen back askew. The light shone on the broad bald dome of the forehead. He had been stabbed between the shoulders, in the back; and one side of the gray coat was ugly to see.

"Good God!" whispered Tracy, growing white. "It's Keatcham! they've killed him! Oh, why didn't I come back before!"

CHAPTER XIII

WHOSE FEET WERE SHOD WITH SILENCE

"Get out your revolver," ordered the colonel; "look sharp! there may be some one here."

But there was not a sign of life revealed by the search. Meanwhile, Winter was examining the body. His first thought was that Keatcham had tried to escape and had been struck down in his flight. Kito would not scruple at such a deed; nor for that matter, Mercer. But why leave the man thus? Why not dispose of the body—unless, indeed, the assassins had been interrupted. Anyhow, what a horrid mess this murder would make of the affair! and how was he to keep the women out of it! All at once, in the examination which he had been making (while a dozen gruesome possibilities tumbled over one another in his mind) he stopped; he put his ear to the man's heart.

"Isn't he dead?" asked Tracy under his breath.

"No, he is not dead, but I'm afraid he'll never

find it out," returned the colonel, shrugging his shoulders. "However, any brandy handy? And get me some water."

"I know where there is some brandy—I'll get it; there is some water in the fountain right—*Cary!*"

"What's the matter?" demanded Cary Mercer in one of the arcade doorways of the *patio*. "What's happened? The devil! Who did this?" He strode up to the kneeling soldier.

"You are in a position to know much better than I," said the colonel dryly. "We came this moment; we found this."

"Cary, did *you* do it?"—the young man laid his hand on Cary's shoulder; his face was ashy but his voice rang full and clear. "If you did, I am sure you had a reason; but I want to know; we're partners in this thing to the finish."

"Thank you, boy," said Cary gently, "that's good to hear. But I didn't hurt him, Endy. Why should I? We'd got what we wanted."

"*Who did?*" asked the colonel.

"I didn't and Kito didn't. He went away to see his only brother who is sick. He hasn't got back. I don't know who did it; but whoever stabbed him must have done it without warning

him; for I didn't hear a sound. I was in the library."

"He's breathing a little, I think," murmured the young man, who was sopping the gray mask of a face while Winter trickled brandy drop by drop into the sagging mouth, "and—look! somebody has tried to rob him; that's a money belt!"

The waistcoat was open and Winter could see, beneath, a money belt with buttoned pockets, which had been torn apart with such haste that one of the buttons had been wrenched off.

"They seem to have been after money," said he; "see! the belt is full of bills; there's only one pocket empty."

"Perhaps he was interrupted," explained Mercer. "Push the brandy, Colonel, he's moving his eyelids, suh!"

"We've got to do something to that hole in him, first," said the colonel. "Is there any doctor—"

"I daren't send for one."

"Tony Arnold might know one we could trust," suggested Tracy. "I can get him over the long distance."

"We want somebody *now*, this minute," declared the colonel.

"There's Janet Smith," said Mercer, "my sister-in-law; she's Mrs. Winter's companion; she used to be a trained nurse and a mighty good one; *she* could be trusted."

Could she? And how the terms of his distrust had changed! He had fought against an answer in the affirmative this morning; now his heart was begging for it; he was cold with fear lest she wasn't this conspirator's confederate.

"Send for them both," said he with no sign of emotion.

"I'll call up Aunt Rebecca," said Mercer. "Isn't he reviving? No? Best not move him till we get the wound dressed, don't you reckon, Colonel?"

But the colonel was already making a rough tourniquet out of his handkerchief and a pencil to stanch the bleeding. The others obeyed his curt directions; and it was not until the still unconscious man was disposed in a more comfortable posture on the cushions which Tracy brought, that Winter sent the latter to the telephone; and then he addressed Mercer. He took a sealed package from an inner pocket and tendered it, saying: "You know who sent it. Whatever happens, you're a Southern gentleman, and I look to you

to see that she—they are kept out of this nasty mess—absolutely."

"Of course," returned Mercer, with a trace of irritation; "what do you take me for? Now, hadn't I better call Janet?"

"But if this were to be discovered—"

"*She* wouldn't have done anything; she is only nursing a wounded man whom she doesn't know, at my request."

"Very well," acquiesced the colonel, with a long sigh as he turned away.

He sat down, cross-legged, like a Turk, on the flags beside the wounded man. Mercer was standing a little way off. It was to be observed that he had not touched Keatcham, nor even approached him close enough to reach him by an outstretched hand. Winter studied his face, his attitude—and suppressed the slightest of starts; Mercer had turned his arm to light another electric bulb and the action revealed some crimson spots on his cuff and a smear on his light trousers above the knee. The lamp was rather high and he was obliged to raise his arm, thus lifting the skirts of his coat which had previously hidden the stain. He did not seem aware that his action had made any disclosure. He was busy with the

light. "That'll be better," said he; "I'll go call up Sister Janet."

How had those stains come? Mercer professed just to have entered. Vainly Winter's brain tried to labor through the crazy bewilderment of it all; Mercer spoke like an honest man—but look at his cuffs! How could any outside assassin enter that locked and guarded house?—yet, if Mercer had not lied, some one must have stolen in and struck Keatcham. Kito? But the Jap was out of the house—perhaps! And Janet Smith, what was *she* doing talking to Atkins? Had she given that reptile any clue? Could he—but it was his opportunity to rescue Keatcham, not to murder him—what a confounded maze!

And what business had he, Rupert Winter, who had supposed himself to be an honorable man, who had sworn to support the Constitution and the laws of the United States, what business had *he* to help law-breakers and murderers escape the just punishment of their deeds? He almost ground his teeth. Oh, well, there was one way out, and that was to resign his commission. He would do it this very night, he resolved; and he swore miserably at himself, at his venerable aunt who must be protected at such a sacrifice, at Atkins,

at the feebly moaning wretch whom he had not ceased all this while to ply carefully with drops of brandy. "You everlasting man-eater, if you dare to die, I'll *kill* you!" he snorted.

Thereupon he went at the puzzle again. Before any answer could come to the telephone calls, a low, mournful, inhuman cry penetrated the thick walls. It was repeated thrice; on the third call, Tracy ran quickly through the *patio* to a side door, barred and locked like all the entrances, released and swung it open and let in Kito. A few murmured words passed between them. The Jap uttered a startled exclamation. "But how can it to be? How? no one can get in! And who shall stab him? For *why?*"

He examined the wounded man, after a gravely courteous salute to Winter; and frowned and sighed. "What did it?" said he; "did who stabbed, take it 'way, he must give *stlong* pull!"

"Whoever did it," said the colonel, "must have put a knee on the man's back and pulled a strong pull, as you say." In speaking the words he felt a shiver, for he seemed to see that red smear above Mercer's knee.

He felt the shiver again when Mercer returned and he glanced at him; there was not a stain on

his shining white cuffs; he had changed them; he had also changed his suit of clothes and his shoes. His eyes met the colonel's; and Winter fancied there was a glint of defiance in them; he made no comment, for no doubt a plausible excuse for the fresh clothes was ready. Well, he (Winter) wouldn't ask it. Poor devil! he had had provocation.

For the next half-hour they were all busy with Keatcham.

"He is better," pronounced the Jap; "he will not live, maybe, but he will talk, he can say who hult him."

"If he can only do that!" cried Mercer. "It is *infernal* to think any one can get in here and do such a thing!"

"Rotten," Tracy moaned.

The colonel said nothing.

They were all still working over Keatcham when a bell pealed. Tracy started; but Mercer looked a shade relieved. "They've come," said he.

"*They?*" repeated the colonel. He scrambled to his feet and gasped.

Miss Smith was coming down the colonnade, but not Miss Smith alone. Aunt Rebecca walked beside her, serene, erect and bearing a small hand-

bag. Miss Smith carried a larger bag; and Tracy had possessed himself of a dress-suit case.

"Certainly, Bertie," remarked his aunt in her softest tone, "I came with Janet. My generation believed in *les convenances.*"

All the colonel could articulate was a feeble, "And Archie? and Millicent?"

"Haley is staying in your room with Archie. Millicent had retired; if she asks for us in the morning we shall not be up. She has an appointment with Janet, but it isn't until half-past eleven. Randall has her instructions."

"But—but—how did you get here?"

Aunt Rebecca drew herself up. "I trust now, Bertie, you will admit that I am as fit as any of you to rough it. If there is one mode of transit I abominate, it is those loathsome, unsanitary, uncivil, joggly street-cars; we came as far as the corner in the *street-cars,* then we walked. Did we want to give the number to a cab-man, do you suppose? Bertie, have you such a thing as a match about you? I think Janet wants to heat a teaspoonful of water for a strychnine hypodermic."

CHAPTER XIV

FROM MRS. MELVILLE'S POINT OF VIEW

The Palace Hotel,
San Francisco, March 24, 1906.

My dear Husband:

Although I sent you a postal yesterday, I am writing again to-day to try to keep you in touch with our *extraordinary series* of events. Nothing has been heard from Archie except the letter —*if he wrote it*—which tells nothing except that his kidnappers use the same kind of writing paper as Miss Janet Smith. I grow more suspicious of her all the time. You ask (but of course you wrote before the recent mysterious and tragical occurrences) you ask do I like Miss Smith any better, now that I am thrown with her so closely. No, Melville, *I* have not the *fatal credulity* of the Winters! I distrust her *more*. She has, I admit, an engaging personality; there is a superficial amiability that would be dangerous to one not on her guard. But I am never off my guard with

her. I'm sorry to say, however, that your brother seems deceived by her plausible ways. And, of course, our poor aunt is still her blind dupe. Aunt Rebecca has failed a good deal this last year; she is quite irritable with me, sometimes; and I suppose it is the insensibility of age, but she does not appear to realize the full horror of this kidnapping. Miss Smith actually seems to suffer more; she looks pale and haggard and has no appetite. I do not think it *all pretense,* either; I dare say much of it is *remorse!* The situation is dreadful. Sometimes I think Aunt Rebecca will not yield to the demands of these wretches who have our poor boy, and that he will be mutilated or murdered; sometimes I think that they have murdered him already and are writing forged letters to throw us off the track. You can imagine how my nerves are shaken! I have seen hardly anything of the city; and of course have not gone into society at all. Indeed, I have met only one pleasant person; that was the secretary of the great financier, Mr. Edwin Keatcham, who was here, next to us. The secretary is a pleasing person quite *comme il faut* in appearance. I met him here in the court where he nearly knocked me over; and he apologized profusely—and really very

nicely, using my name. That surprised me, but he explained that they had been on the train with us. Then I remembered him. His name is Horatio Atkins; and he is very polite. He is on a two weeks' vacation and came here to see Mr. Keatcham, not knowing he was gone. He was really most agreeable and so sympathetic about poor dear Archie. He agreed with me that such a nervous temperament as Archie's suffers much more from unkindness. I could see, in spite of his assumed hopefulness, that he shared my fears. He has met quite a number of our friends. He may (through Mr. Keatcham) be a *most valuable* acquaintance. Didn't you tell me, once, that Keatcham was the leading benefactor of the university?

He (Mr. Atkins) got his vacation on account of his health; and he is going to Southern California. I don't wonder. I have never suffered more than in this land of sunshine! It is not so much the cold of the air as the humidity! Do pray be cautious about changing to your summer underwear. *Don't do it!* I nearly perished, in the bleak wind yesterday, when I tried to visit a few shops. Be sure and take the cough medicine *on the second shelf of our bath-room medicine closet;*

don't mistake *rheumatism liniment* for it; they are both on the same shelf; you would better sort them out. You are *so* absent-minded, Melville, I haven't a peaceful day when I'm away from you; and do for Heaven's sake try to bow to Mrs. Farrell and call her by her right name! You certainly have been to the president's house often enough to know his wife on the street; and I don't think that it was a good excuse which you gave to Professor Dale for calling "Good morning, Katy!" to Mrs. Dale (who was born a Schuyler and is *most* punctilious) *that you mistook her for our cook!*

I miss you very much. Give my love to all our friends and be sure to wear your galoshes (your *rubbers,* you know) when the campus is wet, whether it is raining or not.

Your aff. wife,

M. WINTER.

THE SAME TO THE SAME

The Palace Hotel, March 25, ten P. M.

My dear Husband:

What do you think has happened? I am almost too excited to write. *Archie is back!* Yes, back

safe and sound, and absolutely indifferent, to all appearances, to all our indescribable sufferings on his account! He walked into the parlor about six or a little after, grinning like an ape, as if to disappear from the face of the earth and come back to it were quite the usual thing. And when we questioned him, he professed to be on his word not to tell anything. And Bertie upheld him in this ridiculous position! However, I was told by the detective whom Bertie employed, rather a decent, vulgar, little man, that they (Bertie and he) had cornered the kidnappers and "called their bluff," as he expressed it; but I'm inclined to think they got their ransom from our unfortunate, victimized aunt who is too proud to admit it, and that they probably managed it through Miss S—. I know they called up the room to know if the boy was back; and I puzzled them well, I fancy, by saying he *was*. I may have saved our poor aunt some money by that; but I can't tell, of course. Melville, I am almost *sure* that Miss J. S— is at the bottom of it, whatever the mystery is. I am almost sure that, not content with blackmailing and plundering auntie, Miss S— is now *making a dead set* at poor, blind, simple-hearted Bertie! I have reasons which I

haven't time to enumerate. Bertie will hardly bear a word of criticism of her patiently; in fact, I have ceased to criticize her to him or to Aunt Rebecca—ah, it is a lonely, lonely lot to be clear-sighted; but *noblesse oblige.* But often during the last few days I have thought that Cassandra wasn't enough pitied.

Your aff. wife,

M.

THE SAME TO THE SAME

Casa Fuerte, San Francisco, Cal.,
Wednesday.

Dear Husband:

This heading may surprise you. But we are making a visit to Mr. Anthony Arnold (*the* Arnold's son) in his beautiful house in the suburbs of the city. It was far more convenient for me at the Palace where I found Mrs. Wigglesworth most attentive and congenial and found some *great bargains;* but you know I can not be false to my *Trust.* To watch Aunt Rebecca Winter (without seeming to watch, of course, for the aged always resent the care which they need) is my chief object in this trip; therefore when Mr.

Arnold (whose father she knows, but the old gentleman is traveling in Europe with his married daughter and her family) when the young Arnold urged us all to come and spend a couple of weeks with him, I could not very well refuse. Though a stranger to me, he is not to Auntie or Bertie. The house is his own, left him by his mother, who died not very long ago. At first, I remained at the Palace with Bertie and Archie; Bertie seemed so disturbed at the idea of my going and Aunt Rebecca was very liberal, insisting that I was just as much her guest as before, it was only she who was running away; and the end of it was (she has such a compelling personality, you know) that she went with Randall and J. S. to Casa Fuerte (Strong House—and you would call it well-named could you see it; it is a massive structure!) while we others remained until Sunday. On account of what I have hinted in regard to the designs of a certain lady I was not sorry to have Bertie under another roof. He has a fortune of his own, you know, and a reputation as well. Wealth and position at one blow certainly would appeal to her, an obscure dependent probably of no family (it is not a romantic name), and Bertie is very well-bred and rather handsome with

his black eyebrows and gray hair and aquiline nose. I have been very, very worried, but I feel relieved as to that. Melville, *she is flying at higher game!* In this house is a multimillionaire, in fact the fourth richest man in the United States, Edwin S. Keatcham. He is ill—probably with appendicitis which seems to be the common lot. I asked the doctor—of course, very delicately—and he said, "Well, not exactly, but—" and smiled very confidentially; and begged me not to mention Mr. Keatcham's illness or even that he was in the house. "You know," he said, "that when these great financiers sneeze, the stock-market shakes; so absolute secrecy, please, my dear madam." Don't mention it to a soul, will you? Of course I haven't seen the invalid; but I've seen his valet, who is very English; and I have seen his nurse. Who do you suppose she is? Janet Smith! Yes; you know she has been a trained nurse. Was there ever a more artful creature! But Mr. K. is none of my affairs; he will have to save himself or be lost. Once she is his wife we are safe from that designing woman. I am quite willing to admit his danger and her fascination. Now, Melville, for once admit that I can be just to a woman whom I dislike.

This house is sumptuous; I've a lovely bath-room and a beautiful huge closet with a window. It must have cost a mint of money. I have been told that Arnold *père* made a present of it to his wife; he let the architect and her draw all the plans of it, but he insisted on attending to the construction himself; he said he was not going to have any contract work or "scamping," such as I am reliably informed has been common in these towering new buildings in San Francisco; he picked out all the materials himself and inspected the inspector. It has what they call "reinforced concrete" and all the beams, etc., are steel and the lower story is enormously thick as to walls, in the genuine Mission style. He said he built for earthquakes. The house is all in the Spanish *hidalgo* fashion. I wish you could see the bas-reliefs and the carved furniture with cane seats of the seventeenth century, *all genuine;* and the stamped leather and the iron grille work—*rejas* they call it—all copied from famous Spanish models from Toledo; you know the ancient Spaniards were renowned for their *rejas.* The pictures are fine—all Spanish; I don't know half the names of the artists, but they are all old and imposing and some of them wonderfully preserved. The electric

lights are all in the shape of lanterns. The *patio,* as they call the court around which the house is built, reminded me of the court in Mrs. Gardiner's palace in Boston, only it was not so crowded with *objets* and the pillars are much thicker and the tropical plants and vines more luxuriant—on account of the climate, I suppose. It is all certainly very beautiful.

There is a great arched gateway for carriages —which reminds me, do be sure to send the horses into the country to rest, one at a time; and have Erastus clean the stable properly while they are gone. You can keep one horse for golf; but don't use the brougham ever; and why not send the surrey to be done over while I am gone? Is the piazza painted yet? How does the new cook do? Insist upon her cooking you nourishing food. You might have the Bridge Club of an evening—there are only the four of you—and she might, with Emily's help, get you a nice repast of lobster à la Newburg, sandwiches and chicken salad; but be sure *you* don't touch the lobster! You know what happened the last time; and I shan't be there to put on mustard-plasters and give you Hunyadi water. If Erastus needs any more chamois skins Emily knows where they are, but admonish him

to be careful with them; I never saw mortal man go through chamois skins the way he can; sometimes I think he gives them to the horses to eat!

Good-by,

Your aff. wife,

M.

CHAPTER XV

"THE LIGHT THAT NEVER WAS"

The changes which Mrs. Melville had accepted so philosophically, the metamorphosis of the tragic and lonely house of mystery into a luxurious country villa, the flinging open of the shutters, the marshaling of servants, the turning, one may say, of the lime-light on a rich man's ordinary life—all this had occurred as swiftly and with as little warning as a scene shifts on the stage.

Mrs. Rebecca Winter may have the credit for this *bouleversement* of plans. By an astonishingly early hour, the next morning, she was awake and down-stairs, where Kito and Tracy were making coffee, toasting bread and admiring the oatmeal which had cooked, while they slept, in the Fireless Stove. Tracy had planned a surprise of brown bread, but through no fault of the Fireless, owing solely to his omitting what he called "the pick-me-up," commonly known as soda—an accident, as he truly said, which might happen to any lady

—the bread was "rather too adhesive." The breakfast, notwithstanding, was a cheerful one, because Miss Smith reported the patient a shade better. She looked smiling, although rather heavy-eyed. Mercer and the colonel had taken turns sitting in the adjoining room to bring her ice or hot water or be of service outside.

The colonel had suggested calling a doctor, but Aunt Rebecca had demurred: "Janet can do everything; it is just a question of his heart; and she has digitalis and nitroglycerin and strychnine, the whole outfit of whips. She has dressed the wound with antiseptics. To-morrow will be soon enough for the medical talent." It was she, however, who, as soon as breakfast was over, took first Mercer and Tracy, then the colonel apart, and proposed calling up Keatcham's confidential associates on the long distance telephone. "Strike, but hear me, nephew," she said languidly, smiling at his bewilderment. "Our only chance now is to exhaust trumps. Yesterday the game was won. Keatcham had surrendered, he had told his partners in the deal to make no fight on Tracy's election; they could get what they wanted without the Midland; he advised them to cover their shorts and get ready for a bull market—"

"How did he do all that when he had lost his private code book?"

"How would *you* do it? You would use the long distance telephone. We caught them at Seattle, where his men had gone for the meeting. I don't understand why they needed me to suggest that. There the poor man was, as your Harvard stove agent calls it, rubbering about the library, trying to find *The Fortunes of Nigel* in the edition Darley had illustrated; of course, it wasn't there. He had lost it just before he came to the Palace, he thought. It seems his old cipher needs a particular book, that kind. No doubt in my mind that your theory is right and that Atkins stole it and perhaps thought he stole the key, but didn't get it. He took a memorandum of ciphers which looked like a key. There Keatcham was, with millions hanging on his wires and his modern substitute for the medieval signet-ring that would enforce the message quite lost. What to do? Why, there was nothing to do but get another cipher! They made up a temporary one, right in that library, yesterday afternoon."

"But how could Mercer be sure Keatcham would not play a trick on him? Did he hear the conversation?"

"Certainly not. He took Keatcham's word. Whatever his faults, Keatcham has always kept his word. Mercer was sure he would keep it. He went out of the room. He was in the library when Keatcham was stabbed."

The colonel drew a long, difficult breath. "Then you don't believe Mercer did it?"

"I'm sure he didn't. He didn't hurt him. Why should he kill him after he had surrendered? He had nothing to gain and considerable to risk, if not to lose. We want that bull market."

"But who did then? Atkins? But he is trying to rescue him."

"Is he? How do we know? The rescue was only our supposition. I'm only certain none of our crowd did it."

"Kito?"

"No, Kito keeps absolutely within his orders; he knew how things stood when he went away. Mercer saw him go. He couldn't get in, either; he had to signal to be let in. They were as careful as that. Now, assuming they all are innocent, isn't it the best plan to telephone to Seattle to Keatcham's next friend there?"

"He hasn't any family, has he? His wife died and there were no children, I think."

"No, and if he ever had any brothers or sisters they died when they were little; his business associates are the only people Cary knows about. He is anxious to have word sent at once, because there are important things to do in Keatcham's own interest; he came to California and he has employed Cary in a big Portland cement investment; Cary has been working all the time on it for him—I beg your pardon—" for the colonel had raised his hand with a little gasp.

"Do you mean," said he, "that Mercer has been acting as Keatcham's agent, working in *his interest* all the time he was holding him a prisoner and ready to kill him rather than let him go?"

"Why not? Cary is a man of honor. This cement deal is a perfectly fair one which will give a fair price to the present owners and make a great business proposition. There are other schemes, too, very large ones, which need the man at the wheel. Now, I have talked with Cary and Endicott Tracy and my plan is to call up Warnebold, his next friend, who knows Mercer has been employed by Keatcham and knows his voice and knows he is a trusty man (for Mercer has done some inquiries for him and saved him once from buying a water-logged steel plant) to call *him*

up and—tell him the truth. We can say Mr. Keatcham was mysteriously stabbed; we can ask what is best to do. By that time we can report that we have the best medical assistance—young Arnold will get his family physician, who can be trusted. Warnebold will instruct Mercer, I reckon, to keep the fact of the assault a secret, not even mention that Mr. Keatcham is ill; and very likely he or some one else will come straight on here. Meanwhile, young Arnold can open the house, hire some servants who won't talk—I can get them for him; we all say nothing of the magnate's presence. And the bull market will come all right."

After a little reflection the colonel agreed that the bold course would be the safest. Thus it came about, with amazing rapidity, that the haunted house was opened; that sleek, smiling Chinamen whisked brooms and cleaning cloths at open windows; and Haley and Kito frankly told any curious inquirers who hailed them over the lawn and the flower-beds that young Mr. Arnold was coming home and going to have a house-party of friends. The servants had been carefully selected by Mrs. Winter's powerful Chinese friend; they had no dread of white spooks, however they might

cringe before yellow ones. Mrs. Winter and Randall left their hotel, after all the appropriate ceremonies, amid the lavish bows and smiles of liberally paid bell-boys and porters. They gave out that they were to visit friends; and the colonel, who remained, was to take charge of their mail; hence, with no appearance of secrecy, the trail took to water and was lost, since the motor-car which carried them was supplied by Birdsall and driven by a safe man of his own.

Regarding the detective, Rupert Winter had had what he called "a stiff think;" he could not afford even the remote risk of his going with the picturesque assortment of information which he had obtained about Casa Fuerte and Mercer, into Atkins' employ; therefore he hired him, still, himself. He made a partial but absolutely truthful statement of the case; he said frankly: "Birdsall, I'm not going to treat you fair, for I'm not going to tell you all I know, because—well, for one thing, I don't feel sure how much I do know myself. But all I'm going to ask of you is to watch the house, day and night, without seeming to watch it. You will oblige Mr. Keatcham as well as me. There is a big game going on, but it isn't what you thought. Mr. Keatcham's best helpers

are right in that house. Mercer and I and young Fireless and Arnold are doing our best to guard him, not hurt him. Now, there is big money for you if you will watch out for us."

Birdsall reflected a moment before he answered, but he did answer, screwing up his face: "I don't like these jobs in the dark; but I like you, Colonel, and it's a go."

Keatcham's valet was next summoned from his vacation and became, in Tracy's phrase, "a dandy sub-nurse."

The Tracys' family physician came twice a day. He was known to be visiting one of the guests who had fallen ill. Mercer sent three or four telegrams a day to Seattle and to New York, to Keatcham's associates. Several times he held a conversation of importance over the telephone with the man who acted as distributer of intelligence. Warnebold, himself, came on to San Francisco from Seattle, and was received with every courtesy. He questioned Kito, questioned Mercer, questioned the colonel. Tracy had effaced himself and was in Pasadena for a day or two.

The colonel was the star witness (at least this was young Arnold's verdict). His narrative was to the effect that he had gone out to see Mercer,

who was a family connection; no, he was not alone, he had a young friend with him; confidentially, he would admit that the friend was Mr. Tracy's son; and, while he could not be sure, he had reason to suspect that he, "young Tracy," had been conducting some delicate negotiations with Mr. Keatcham. At this point the interlocutor nodded slightly; he was making the deductions expected and explaining to himself Keatcham's astonishing communication over the telephone. So, he was surmising shrewdly, *that* was the clue; the old man had been making some sort of a deal with Tracy through the son; well, they were protected, thanks to Keatcham's orders. Likely as not they never would know all the reasons for this side-stepping.

"I understand, then," he said, as one who holds a clue but has no notion of letting it slip out of his own fingers, "you and young Tracy got here and you found Mr. Keatcham? How did you get in? Did Mr. Mercer let you in? How did it happen he didn't discover Mr. Keatcham instead of you, or did you come in on the side?"

Mrs. Winter who was in the room had a diversion ready, but it was not needed; the colonel answered unhesitatingly, with a frank smile:

"No, we came in ourselves; young Tracy had a key."

"Oh, he *had,* had he?" returned Warnebold with a shrug of the shoulders.

"He is a great friend of young Arnold's; they were at Harvard together, belonged to the same societies."

"Yes, I understand; well—"

The rest of the interview was clear sailing. Mrs. Winter's presence was explained in her very own words. "Of course I was put out a good deal at first," added the colonel, "by the women getting mixed up in it; but Miss Smith undoubtedly saved Mr. Keatcham's life. I never saw any one who seemed to think of so many things to do. Half a dozen times, that first night, he seemed to be fading away; but every time she brought him back. I was anxious to have a doctor called in; but Mercer seemed opposed to making a stir—"

"He knew his business thoroughly," interjected Keatcham's confidant, "he undoubtedly had his instructions to keep Keatcham's presence here a secret."

"He *had,*" said Mrs. Winter; "besides, Miss Smith is his sister-in-law and he knew that she could be trusted to do everything possible. And,

really, it didn't look as if anything could help him. I hardly believed that he could live an hour when I saw him."

"Nor I," the colonel corroborated.

Warnebold, plainly impressed by Mrs. Winter's grand air, assured them both that he felt that everything that could be done had been done; Miss Smith was quite wonderful; and he would admit (of course, confidentially) that Mr. Keatcham did have a heart trouble; Mr. Mercer had recalled one or two fainting fits; there was some congestion; and the doctor found a sad absence of reaction; he believed that there had been a—er—syncope of some sort before the stabbing; Mr. Keatcham himself, although he was still too weak to talk much, had no recollection of anything except a very great faintness. Mr. Mercer's theory seemed to cover the ground.

"Except as to who did the stabbing," said the colonel.

"Has Mr. Keatcham any bitter enemies?" asked Aunt Rebecca thoughtfully.

"What man who has made a great fortune hasn't?" demanded Warnebold with a saturnine wrinkle of the lips. "But our enemies don't stab or shoot us, nowadays."

"They do out West," said the colonel genially; "we're crude."

"Are you in earnest?"

"Entirely. I know a man, a mine superintendent, who got into a row with his miners because he discharged a foreman, one of the union lights, for stealing ore. In consequence he got a big strike on his hands, found a dynamite bomb under his front piazza, and was shot at twice. The second time he was too quick for them; he shot back and killed one of them. He thought it was time to put a stop to so much excitement, so he sent for the second assassin—"

"And had him arrested?"

"Oh, dear, no; he wasn't in Massachusetts; I told you he wanted the thing stopped. No, he sent for him and told him that he had no special ill feeling toward *him,* but that the next time anything of the kind happened he had made arrangements to have not him, or any other thug who was doing the work, but the two men who were at the bottom of the whole business, killed within twenty-four hours. They took the hint and kind feeling now prevails."

Warnebold grunted; he declared it to be a beastly creepy situation; he said he never wanted

to sit down without a wall against his back; and he intimated that the president of the United States was to blame for more than he realized. "I hope you have some one watching the house," he fumed, "and that he—well, he doesn't belong to the police force."

"No, he's an honest mercenary," said the colonel; "I'll introduce him to you."

"And you haven't found any method of entering the house?" fumed the financier.

"No," said Aunt Rebecca.

"Yes," said the colonel.

He laughed as they both whirled round on him. "You speak first, my dear aunt," he proposed politely; "I'll explain later."

Mrs. Winter said that a most careful examination had been made not only by Mercer and the colonel together, but also by young Arnold. They found everything absolutely secure; all the windows were bolted and all the cellar gratings firm and impossible to open.

"Now, you?" said Warnebold.

"I only found out to-day," apologized the colonel, "or I should have spoken of it. I got to thinking; and it occurred to me that in a house built, as I understood from Arnold, by a very

original architect, there might be some queer features, such as secret passages. With that in my mind, I induced the young gentleman to hunt up the architect, as he lives in San Francisco. He not only showed us some very pretty secret passages about the house, but one that led into it. Shall I show it to you?"

On their instantly expressed desire to see the hidden way, the colonel led them to the *patio*. He walked to the engaged column which once before had interested him; he pressed a concealed spring under the boldly carved eight-pointed flower; instantly, the entire side of the columns swung as a door might swing. As they peered into the dusky space below, the colonel, who had put down his arm, pressed an electric button and the white light flooded the shaft, revealing an ingenious ladder of cleats fitted into steel uprights.

"Here," said the colonel, "is a secret way from the *patio* to the cellar. The cellar extends a little beyond the *patio* and there is a way down from the yard to the cellar—I can quickly show you, if you like."

"No, thank you," replied Warnebold, who was a man of full habit and older than the colonel, "I will take *your* personal experience instead."

"Then if you will go out into the yard with me I will show you where a charming pergola ends in a vine-wreathed sun-dial of stone that you may tug at and not move; but press your foot on a certain stone, the whole dial swings round on a concealed turn-table such as they have in garages, you know. You will have no difficulty in finding the right stone, because an inscription runs round the dial: *Más vale tarde que nunca;* and the stone is directly opposite *nunca.* When you have moved away your dial you will see a gently inclining tunnel, high enough for a man to walk in without stooping, wide enough for two, and much better ventilated than the New York subway. That tunnel leads to a secret door opening directly into the cellar, so skilfully contrived that it looks like an air-shaft. This door is only a few feet from the shaft to the *patio.* We have found a bolt and put it on this entrance, but there wasn't any before; nor did any one in the house know of the secret passage."

The colonel went on to say that on questioning the architect he averred that he had never mentioned the secret passage to his knowledge—except that very recently, only a few days before, at a dinner, he had barely alluded to it; and one

of the gentlemen present, an Easterner, had asked him where he got a man to make such a contrivance—it must take skill. He had mentioned the name of the workman. The colonel had hunted up the artisan mentioned, only to find that he had left town to take a job somewhere; no one seemed to know where. Of course he had inquired of everybody. The name of the Easterner was Atkins.

"Atkins," cried Warnebold, at this turn of the narrative, "Keatcham's secretary? Why, he's the boldest and slyest scoundrel in the United States! He started a leak in Keatcham's office that made him a couple of hundred thousands and lost us a million, and might have lost us more if Mercer hadn't got on to him. Keatcham wouldn't believe he had been done to the extent he was at first—you know the old man hates to own to any one's getting the better of him; it's the one streak of vanity I've ever been able to discover in him. Otherwise, he's cold and keen as a razor on a frosty morning. He was convinced enough, however, to discharge Atkins; the next news I had, he was trying to send him to the pen. Gave us instructions how to get the evidence. No allusion to his past confidence in the fellow, simply the or-

ders—as if we knew all the preliminaries. Wonderful man, Mr. Keatcham, Colonel Winter."

"Very," agreed the colonel dryly.

By this time the warrior and the man of finance were on easy terms. Warnebold remained three days. Before he left the patient had been pronounced out of danger and had revived enough to give some succinct business directions. Mercer had been sent to look out for the cement deal; and Keatcham appeared a little relieved and brighter when he was told that Mercer was on his way.

"He will put it through if it can be put," he had said weakly to Warnebold; "he's moderately smart and perfectly honest." Such words, Warnebold explained later to Mrs. Winter, coming from Keatcham might be regarded almost as extravagant commendation. "Your cousin's fortune is made," he pronounced solemnly; "he can get Atkins' place, I make no doubt."

Mrs. Winter thought that Mercer was a very valuable man.

"Only always so melancholy; I've been afraid he had something serious the matter with his digestion. It's these abominable quick lunches that are ruining the health of all our steady young

men. I don't know but they are almost as bad as chorus girls and late suppers. Well, Mrs. Winter, I'm afraid we shall not have another chance at bridge until I see you in New York. But, anyhow, we stung the colonel once—and with Miss Smith playing her greatest game, too. Pity she can't induce Mr. Keatcham to play; but he never touches a card, hardly ever takes anything to drink, doesn't like smoking especially, takes a cigarette once in a while only, never plays the races or bets on the run of the vessel—positively such icy virtue gives an ordinary sinner the cramps! Very great man though, Mrs. Winter, and a man we are all proud to follow; he may be overbearing; and he doesn't praise you too much, but somehow you always have the consciousness that he sees every bit of good work you do and is marking it up in your favor; and you won't be the loser. There is no question he has a hold on his associates; but he certainly is not what I call a genial man."

Only on the day of his departure did Warnebold, in young Arnold's language, "loosen up" enough to tell Arnold and the colonel a vital incident. The night of the attack a telegram was sent to Warnebold in Keatcham's confidential

cipher, directing the campaign against Tracy to be pushed hard, ordering the dumping of some big blocks of stock on the market and arranging for their dummy purchasers. The naming of Atkins as the man in charge was plausible enough, presuming there had been no knowledge of the break in his relations with Keatcham. The message was couched in Keatcham's characteristic crisp phraseology. But for the receiver's knowledge of the break and but for the previous long-distance conversation, it had reached its mark. The associates of Keatcham were puzzled. The hands were the hands of Esau but the voice was the voice of Jacob. There had been a hurried consultation into which the second long-distance telephone from San Francisco broke like a thunderclap. It decided the hearers to keep to their instructions and disregard the cipher despatch.

"And didn't you send any answer?" the colonel asked.

"Oh, certainly; we had an address given, The Palace Hotel, Mr. John G. Makers. We wired Mr. Makers—in cipher. 'Despatch received. Will attend to it,' I signed. And I wired to the manager of the hotel to notice the man who took the despatch. It wasn't a man, it was a lady."

"A lady?"

"Yes, she had an order for Mr. Makers' telegrams. Mr. Makers gave the order. Mr. Makers himself only stopped one night and went away in the morning and nobody seemed to remember him particularly; he was a nondescript sort of party."

"But the lady?" The colonel's mouth felt dry.

"The lady? She was tall, fine figure, well dressed, dark hair, the telegraph girl thought, but she didn't pay any special attention. She had a very pleasant, musical voice."

"That doesn't seem to be very definite," remarked the colonel with a crooked smile.

It didn't look like a clue to Warnebold, either; but he was convinced of one thing, namely, that it would pay to watch the ex-secretary.

"And," chuckled he, "there's a cheerful side to the affair. Atkins is loaded to the guards with short contracts; and the Midland is booming; if the rise continues, he can't cover without losing about all he has. By the way, we got another wire later in the day demanding what we were about, what it all meant that we hadn't obeyed instructions. Same address for answer. This time we thought we had laid a nice trap. But you can't reckon on a hotel; somehow, before we got warn-

ing, Mr. Makers had telephoned for his despatch and got it."

"Where did he telephone from?"

"From his room in the Palace."

"I thought he had given up his room?"

"He had. But—somebody telephoned to the telegraph office from somewhere in the hotel and got Mr. Makers' wire. You can get pretty much everything except a moderate bill out of a hotel."

"I see," said the colonel and immediately in his heart compared himself to the immortal "blind man;" for his wits appeared to him to be tramping round futilely in a maze; no nearer the exit than when the tramp began.

That night, after Warnebold had departed, leaving most effusive thanks and expressions of confidence, Winter was standing at his window absently looking at the garden faintly colored by the moonlight, while his mind was plying back and forth between half a dozen contradictions.

He went over the night of the attack on Keatcham; he summoned every look, every motion of Janet Smith; in one phase of feeling he cudgeled himself for a wooden fool who had been absolutely brutal to a defenseless woman who trusted him; he hated himself for the way he would not

see her when she looked toward him; no wonder at last she stiffened, and now she absolutely avoided him! But, in a swift revulsion against his own softness he was instantly laying on the blows as lustily because of his incredible, pig-headed credulity. How absolutely simple the thing was! She *cared* for this scoundrel of an Atkins who had first betrayed his employer and then tried to murder him. Very likely they had been half engaged down there in Virginia; and he had crawled out of his engagement; it would be quite like the cur! Later he found that just such a distinguished, charming woman, who had family and friends, was what he wanted; it would be easy enough for him to warm up his old passion, curse him! Then, he had met her and run in a bunch of plausible lies that had convinced her that he had been a regular angel in plain clothes; hadn't done a thing to Cary or to her. Atkins was such a smooth devil! Winter could just picture him whining to the girl, putting his life in her hands and all that rot; and making all kinds of a tool of her—why, the whole hand was on the board! So she was ready to throw them all overboard to save Atkins from getting his feet wet. That was why she looked so pale and haggard of a morning

sometimes, in spite of that ready smile of hers; that was why her eyes were so wistful; she wasn't a false woman and she sickened of her squalid part. She loved Aunt Rebecca and Archie—all the same, she would turn them both down for him; while as to Rupert Winter, late of the United States army, a worn-out, lame, elderly idiot who had flung away the profession he loved and every chance of a future career in order to have his hands free to keep her out of danger—where were there words blistering enough for such puppy-dog folly! At this point in his jealous imaginings the pain in him goaded him into motion; he began furiously pacing the room, although his lame leg, which he had been using remorselessly all day, was sending jabs and twists of agony through him. But after a little he halted again before the casement window.

The wide, darkening view; the great, silent city with its myriad lights; the shining mist of the bay; the foot-hills with their sheer, straw-colored streaks through the forests and vineyards; the illimitable depths of star-sown, violet sky—all these touched his fevered mood with a sudden calm. His unrest was quieted, as one whose senses are cooled by a running stream.

"You hot-headed Southerner!" he upbraided himself, "don't get up in the air without any real proof!"

Almost in the flitting of the words through his brain he saw her. The white gown, which was her constant wear in the sick-room, defined her figure clearly against a clump of Japan plum-trees. Their purplish red foliage rustled; and an unseen fountain beyond made a delicate tinkle of water splashing a marble basin. Her face was hidden; only the moonlight gently drew the oval of her cheek. She was standing still, except that one foot was groping back and forth as if trying to find something. But, as he looked, his face growing tender, she knelt on the sod and pulled something out of the ground. This something she seemed to dust off with her handkerchief—he could not see the object, but he could see the flutter of the handkerchief; and when she rose the white linen partly hid the thing in her hand. Only partly, because when she passed around the terrace wall the glow from an electric lantern, in an arch, fell full upon her and burnished a long, thin blade of steel.

He looked down on her from his unlighted chamber; and suddenly she looked up straight at the windows of the room where she thought he

was sleeping; and smiled a dim, amused, weary, tender smile. Then she sped by, erect and light of foot; and the deep shadow of the great gateway took her. All he could see was the moonlight on the bluish green lawn; and the white electric light on the gleaming rubber-trees and dusty palms.

He sat down. He clasped his hands over his knee. He whistled softly a little Spanish air. He laughed very gently. "My dear little girl," said he, "I am going to marry you. You may be swindled into helping a dozen murderers; but I am going to marry you!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE REAL EDWIN KEATCHAM

One Sunday after Mrs. Melville Winter and Archie came to Casa Fuerte, Mr. Keatcham sent for the colonel. There was nothing unusual in such a summons. From the beginning of his illness he had shown a curious, inexpressive desire for the soldier's company. He would have him sit in the room, although too weak to talk to him, supposing he wished to talk, which was not at all sure. "I like-to-see-him-just-sitting-there," he faltered to his nurse, "can't-he-read-or-play-solitaire-like-the-old-lady?"

Sometimes Winter would be conscious that the feeble creature in the bed, with the bluish-white face, was staring at him. Whether the glassy eyes beheld his figure or went beyond him to unfinished colossal schemes that might change the fate of a continent, or drifted backward to the poverty-stricken home, the ferocious toil and the unending self-denial of Keatcham's youth on the Pacific

slope, the dim gaze gave no clue. All that was apparent was that it was always on Winter, as he curled his legs under his chair, wrote or knitted his brow over rows of playing-cards.

At the very first, Keatcham's mind had wandered; he used to shrink from imaginary people who were in the room; he would try to talk to them, distressing himself painfully, for he was so weak that his nurses turned his head on the pillow; he would feebly motion them away. In such aberrations he would sometimes appeal, in a changed, thin, childish voice, to the obscure, toil-worn pioneer woman who had died while he was a lad. "Mother, I *was* a good boy; I always got up when you called me, didn't I? I helped you iron when the other boys were playing—mother, please don't let that old woman stay and cry here!" Or he would plead: "Mother, tell her, say, *you* tell her I didn't know her son would kill himself—I couldn't tell—he was a damn coward, anyhow—excuse me, mama, I didn't mean to swear, but they make me so awful mad!" There was a girl who came, sometimes, from whose presence he shrank; a girl he had never seen; nor, indeed, had he ever known in the flesh any of the shapes which haunted him. They had lived; but never

had his eyes fallen on them. Nevertheless, their presence was as real to him as that of the people about him whom he could hear and touch and see. It did not take Winter's imagination long to piece out the explanation of these apparitions: they were specters of the characters in those dramas of ruthless conquest which Mercer had culled out of newspaper "stories" and affidavits and court reports and forced upon Keatcham's attention. Miss Smith helped him to the solution, although her own ignorance of Mercer's method was puzzling. "How did he ever know old Mrs. Ferris?" she said. "He called her Ferris and he talks about her funny dress—she always did wear a queer little basque and full skirt after all the world went into blouses—but how did *he* ever come across her? They had a place on the James that had been in the family a hundred years and had to lose it on account of the Tidewater; and Nelson Ferris blew his brains out."

"Don't you know how?" asked the colonel. "Well, I'll tell you my guess sometime. Who is the girl who seems to make him throw a fit so?"

"I'm not sure; I imagine it is poor Mabel Ray; there were two of them, sisters; they made money out of their Tidewater stock and went to New

York to visit some kin; and they got scared when the stock fell and the dividends stopped; and they sold out at a great loss. They never did come back; they had persuaded all their kin to invest; and the stopping of the dividends made it difficult for some of the poor ones—Mabel said she couldn't face her old aunts. She went on the stage in New York. She was very pretty; she wasn't very strong. Anyway, you can imagine the end of the story. I saw her in the park last winter when Mrs. Winter was in New York; she turned her face away—poor Mabel!"

Through Janet Smith's knowledge of her dead sister's neighbors, Winter got a dozen pitiful records of the wreckage of the Tidewater. "Mighty interesting reading," he thought grimly, "but hardly likely to make the man responsible for them stuck on himself!" Then he would look at the drawn face on the pillow and listen to the babblings of the boy who had had no childhood; and the frown would melt off his brow.

He did not always talk to his mother when his mind wandered; several times he addressed an invisible presence as "Helen" and "Dear" with an accent of tenderness very strange on those inflexible lips. When he talked to this phantasm he was

never angry or distressed; his turgid scowl cleared; the austere lines chiseling his cheeks and brow faded; he looked years younger. But for the most part, it was to no unreal creature that he turned, but to Colonel Rupert Winter. He would address him with punctilious civility, but as one who was under some obligation to assist him, saying, for instance, "Colonel Winter, I must beg you not to let those persons in the room again. They annoy me. But you needn't let Mercer know that. Please attend to it yourself, and get them away. Miss Smith says you will. Explain to them that when I get up I will investigate their claims. I'm too sick now!"

Conscious and free from fever, he was barely able to articulate, but when delirious fancies possessed him he could talk rapidly, in a good voice. Very soon it was clear that he was calmer for the colonel's presence. Hence, the latter got into the habit of sitting in the room. He would request imaginary ruined and desperate beings to leave Keatcham in peace; he would gravely rise and close the door on their departure. He never was surprised nor at a loss; and his dramatic nerve never failed. Later, as the visions faded, a moody reserve wrapped the sick man. He lay motionless,

evidently absorbed by thought. In one way he was what doctors call a very good patient. He obeyed all directions; he was not restless. But neither was he ever cheerful. Every day he asked for his pulse record and his temperature and his respiration. After a consultation with the doctor, Miss Smith gave them to him.

"It is against the rules," grumbled the doctor, "but I suppose each patient has to make his own rules." On the same theory he permitted the colonel's visits.

Therefore, with no surprise, Winter received and obeyed the summons. Keatcham greeted him with his usual stiff courtesy.

"The doctor says I can have the—papers—will you pick out—the—one—day after I was stabbed."

Miss Smith indicated a pile on a little table, placed ready at hand. "I kept them for him," she said.

"Read about—the Midland," commanded the faint, indomitable voice.

"Want the election and the newspaper sentiments?" asked the colonel; he gave it all, conscious the while of Janet Smith's compassionate, perplexed, sorrowful eyes.

"Don't skip!" Keatcham managed to articulate after a pause.

The colonel gave him a keen glance. "Want it straight, without a chaser?"

Keatcham closed his eyes and nodded.

The colonel read about the virtually unanimous election of Tracy; the astonishment of the outsiders among the supposed anti-Tracy element; the composed and impenetrable front of the men closest to Keatcham; the reticence and amiability of Tracy himself, in whose mien there could be detected no hint either of hostility or of added cordiality toward the men who had been expected "to drag his bleeding pride in the dust;" finally of the response of the stock-market in a phenomenal rise of Midland.

Keatcham listened with his undecipherable mask of attention; there was not so much as the flicker of an eyelid or the twitch of a muscle. All he said was: "Now, read if there is anything about the endowment of the new fellowships in some medical schools for experimental research."

"Who gives the endowment?"

"Anonymous. In memory of Maria Warren Keatcham and Helen Bradford Keatcham. Find anything?"

The colonel found a great deal about it. The paper was full of this munificent gift, amounting to many millions of dollars and filling (with most carefully and wisely planned details) an almost absolute vacuum in the American scheme of education. The dignity and fame of the chairs and fellowships endowed were ample to tempt the best ability of the profession. The reader grew enthusiastic as he read.

"Why, it's immense! And we have always needed it!" he exclaimed.

"There are some letters about it, there,"—Keatcham feebly motioned to a number of neatly opened, neatly assorted letters on a desk. "The doctor said I might have the letters read to me. Miss Smith got him to. For fear of exciting you, the doctors usually let you worry your head off because you don't know about things. I've got to carry a few things through if it kills me. Don't you see?"

"I see," said the colonel, "you shall."

The next time he saw the financier, although only a few days had elapsed, he was much stronger; he was able to breathe comfortably, he spoke with ease, in his ordinary voice; in fine, he looked his old self again, merely thinner and paler.

Hardly was the colonel seated before he said without preface—Keatcham never made approaches to his subject, regarding conversational road-making as waste of brains for a busy man:

"Colonel, Miss Smith hasn't time to be my nurse and secretary both. I won't have one sent from New York; will you help her out?"

The colonel's lips twitched; he was thinking that were Miss Smith working for Atkins, she couldn't have a better chance to make a killing. "But I'll bet my life she isn't," he added; "she may be trying to save his life, but she isn't playing his game!"

He said aloud: "I will, Mr. Keatcham, if you will let me do it as part of the obligation of the situation; and there is no bally rot about compensation."

"Very well," said Keatcham. He did not hesitate; it was (as the colonel had already discovered) the rarest thing in the world for him to hesitate; he thought with astonishing rapidity; and he formulated his answer while his interlocutor talked; before the speech was over the answer was ready. Another trait of his had struck the soldier, namely, the laborious correctness of his speech; it was often formal and old-fashioned;

Aunt Rebecca said that he talked like Daniel Webster's speeches; but it had none of the homely and pungent savor one might expect from a man whose boyhood had scrambled through miners' camps into a San Francisco stock office; who had never gone to school in his life by daylight; who had been mine superintendent, small speculator and small director in California until he became a big speculator and big railway controller in New York.

"You might begin on the morning mail," Keatcham continued. "Let me sort them first." He merely glanced at the inscriptions on the envelopes, opening and taking out one which he read rather carelessly, frowning a little before he placed it to one side.

A number of the letters concerned the endowments of the experimental chairs at the universities. Keatcham's attention was not lightened by any ray of pleasure. Once he said: "That fellow has caught my idea," and once: "That's right," but there was no animation in his voice, no interest in his pallid face. Stealing a furtive scrutiny of it, now and then, Rupert Winter was impressed with its mystical likeness to that of Cary Mercer. There was no physical similarity of color or fea-

ture; it was a likeness of the spirit rather than the flesh. The colonel's eyes flashed.

"I have it!" he exclaimed within, "I have it; they are fanatics, both of them; Keatcham's a fanatic of finance and Mercer is a fanatic of another sort; but fanatics they both are, ready to go any length for their principles or their ambitions or their revenge! *J'ai trouvé le mot d'énigme,* as Aunt Becky would say—I wonder what she'll say to this sudden psychological splurge of mine."

"The business hour is up,"—it was Miss Smith entering with a bowl on a white-covered tray; the sun glinted the lump of ice in the milk and the silver spoon was dazzling against the linen—"your biscuit and milk, Mr. Keatcham. Didn't you have it when you were a boy?"

"I did, Miss Janet,"—and Keatcham actually smiled. "I used to think crackers and milk the nicest thing in the world."

"That is because you never tasted corn pone and milk; but you are going to."

"When you make it for me. I'm glad you're such a good cook. It's one of your ways I like. My mother was a very good cook. She could make better dishes out of almost nothing than

these mongrel chefs can make with the whole world."

"I reckon she could," said Miss Smith; she was speaking sincerely.

"When my father didn't strike pay dirt, my mother would open her bakery and make pies for the miners; she could make bread with potato yeast or 'salt-emptins'—can you make salt-rising bread?"

"I can—shall I make you some, to-morrow?"

"I'd like it. My mother used to make more money than my father; sometimes when we children were low in clothes and dad owed a bigger lot of money than usual, we had a laundry at our house as well as a bakery. Yet, in spite of all the work, my mother found time to teach all of us; and she knew how to teach, too; for she was principal of a school when my father married her. She was a New Englander; so was he; but they went West. We're forty-niners. I saw the place where our little cloth-and-board shack used to stand. After the big fire, you know. It burned us all up; we had saved a good deal and my mother had a nice bakery. She worked too hard; it killed her. Work and struggle and losing the children."

"They died?" said Miss Janet.

"Diphtheria. They didn't know anything about the disease then. We all had it; and my little sister and both my brothers died; but I'm tough. I lived. My mother fell into what they called a decline. I was making a little money then—I was sixteen; but I couldn't keep her from working. Perhaps it made no difference; but it did make a difference her not having the—the right kind of food. Nobody knew anything about consumption then. I used to go out in the morning and be afraid I'd find her dead when I got back. One night I did." He stopped abruptly, crimsoning up to his eyes—" I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"I call that tough,"—as the colonel blurted out the words, he was conscious of a sense of repetition. When had he said those very same words before, to whom? Of all people in the world, to Cary Mercer. "Mighty tough," murmured he softly.

"Yes," said Keatcham, "it was." He did not say anything more. Neither did the colonel. Ketcham obediently ate his milk and biscuit; and very shortly the colonel took his leave.

The next morning after an uneventful hour of sorting, reading and answering letters for Miss

Smith to copy on the traveling typewriter, Keatcham gave his new secretary a sharp sensation; he ordered in his quiet but peremptory fashion: "Now put that trash away; sit down; tell me all you know of Cary—real name is Cary Mercer, isn't it?"

The colonel said it was; he asked him if he wanted everything.

"Everything. Straight. Without a chaser," snapped Keatcham.

The colonel gave it to him. He began with his own acquaintance; he told about Phil Mercer; he did not slur a detail; neither did he underscore one; Keatcham got the uncolored facts. He heard them impassively, making only one comment: "A great deal of damage would be saved in this world if youngsters could be shut up until they had sense enough not to fool with firearms." When Winter came to Mercer's own exposition of his motives and his design if successful in his raid on the kings of the market, Keatcham grunted; at the end he breathed a noiseless jet of a sigh. "You don't think Mercer is at all"—he tapped the side of the head.

"No more than you are."

"Or you?"

"Oh, well," the colonel jested, "we all have a prejudice in favor of our own sanity. What I meant was that Mercer is a bit of a fanatic; his hard luck has—well, prejudiced him—"

Keatcham's cold, firm lips straightened into his peculiar smile, which was rather of perception than of humor.

One might say of him—Aunt Rebecca Winter did say of him—that he saw the incongruous, which makes up for humor, but he never enjoyed it; possibly it was only another factor in his contempt of mankind.

"Colonel," said Keatcham, "do you think Wall Street is a den of thieves?"

"I do," said the colonel promptly. "I should like to take a machine gun or two and clean you all out."

Keatcham did not smile; he blinked his eyes and nodded. "I presume a good many people share your opinion of us."

"Millions," replied the colonel.

Again Keatcham nodded. "I thought so," said he. "Of course you are all off; Wall Street is as necessary to the commonwealth as the pores to your skin; they don't make the poison in the system any more than the pores do; they only let it

escape. And I suppose you think that big financiers who control the trusts and the railways and—"

"Us," the colonel struck in, "well?"

"You think we are thieves and liars and murderers and despots?"

"All of that," said the colonel placidly; "also fools."

"You certainly don't mince your words."

"You don't want me to. What use would my opinion be in a one-thousandth attenuation? You're no homeopath; and whatever else you may be, you're no coward."

"Yet, you think I surrendered to Mercer? You think I did it because I was afraid he would kill me? I suppose he would have killed me if I hadn't, eh?"

"He can speak for himself about that; he seems—well, an earnest sort of man. But I don't think you gave in because you were afraid, if that is what you mean. You are no more afraid than he was! You wanted to live, probably; you had big things on hand. The Midland was only a trump in the game; you could win the odd trick with something else; you let the Midland go."

"Pretty close,"—Keatcham really smiled—"but

there is a good deal more of it. I was shut up with the results of my—my work. He did it very cleverly. I had nothing to distract me. There were the big type-written pages about the foolish people who had lost their money, in some cases really through my course, mostly because they got scared and let go and were wiped out when, if they had had confidence in me and held on, they would be very much better off, now. But they didn't, and they were ruined and they starved and took their boys out of college and mortgaged their confounded homes that had been in their families ever since Adam; and the old people died of broken hearts and the girls went wrong and some of the idiotic quitters killed themselves—it was not the kind of crowd you would want shut up with you in the dark! I was shut up with them. He had some sort of way of switching off the lights from the outside. I never saw a face or heard a voice. I would have to sit there in the dark after he thought I had read enough to occupy my mind. It—was unpleasant. Perhaps you suppose that brought me round to his way of thinking?"

The colonel meditated. "I'll tell you honestly," he said after a pause, "I was of that opinion, or

something of the kind, until I talked your case over with my aunt—"

"The old dame is not a fool; what did she say?"

"She said no, he didn't convert you; but he convinced you how other people looked at your methods. You couldn't get round the fact that a majority of your countrymen think your type of financier is worse than smallpox, and more contagious."

"Oh, she put it that way, did she? I wish she would write a prospectus for me. Well, you think she was nearer right than you?"

"I think *you* do; I myself think it was a little of both. You've got a heart and a conscience originally, though they have got pretty well tanned out in the weather; you didn't want to be sorry for those people, but you are. They have bothered you a lot; but it has bothered you more to think that instead of going down the ages as a colossal benefactor and empire builder, you are hung up on the hook to see where you're at; and where you *will* be if the people get thoroughly aroused. You all are building bigger balloons when it ought to be you for the cyclone cellar! But *you* are different. You can see ahead. I give you credit for seeing."

"Have you ever considered," said Keatcham slowly, "that in spite of the iniquitous greed of the men you are condemning, in spite of their oppression of the people, the prosperity of the country is unparalleled? How do you explain it?"

"Crops," said the colonel; "the crops were too big for you."

"You might give *us* a little credit—your aunt does. She was here to-day; she is a manufacturer and she comprehended that the methods of business can not be revolutionized without somebody's getting hurt. Yet, on the whole, the change might be immensely advantageous. Now, why, in a nutshell, do you condemn us?"

"You're after the opinion of the average man, are you?"

"I suppose so, the high average."

The colonel crossed his legs and uncrossed them again; he looked straight into the other's eyes; his own narrowed with thought.

"I'll tell you," said he. "I don't know much about the Street or high finance or industrial development. I'm a plain soldier; I'm not a manufacturer and I'm not a speculator. I understand perfectly that you can't have great changes without somebody's getting hurt in the shuffle. It

is beyond me to decide whether the new industrial arrangements with the stock-jobber on top instead of the manufacturer will make for better or for worse—but I know this; it is against the fundamental law to do evil that good may come. And you fellows in Wall Street, when, to get rich quick, you lie about stocks in order to buy cheap and then lie another way to sell dear; when you make a panic out of whole cloth, as you did in 1903, because, having made about all you can out of things going up, you want to make all you can out of them going down; when you play football with great railway properties and insurance properties, because you are as willing to rob the dead as the living; when you do all that, and when your imitators, who haven't so much brains or so much decency as you, when *they* buy up legislatures and city councils; and *their* imitators run the Black Hand business and hold people up who have money and are not strong enough, they think, to hunt them down—why, not being a philosopher but just a plain soldier, I call it bad, *rotten* bad. What's more, I can tell you the American people won't stand for it."

"You think they can help themselves?"

"I know they can. You fellows are big, but

you won't last over night if the American people get really aroused. And they are stirring in their sleep and kicking off the bed-clothes."

"Yet you ought to belong to the conservatives."

"I do. That's why the situation is dangerous. You as an old San Franciscan ought to remember how conservative was that celebrated Vigilance Committee. It is when the long-suffering, pusillanimous, conservative element gets fighting mad that something is doing."

"Maybe," muttered Keatcham thoughtfully. "I believe we can manage for you better than you can for yourselves; but when the brakes are broken good driving can't stop the machine; all the chauffeur can do is to keep the middle of the road. I like to be beaten as little as any of them; but I'm not a fool. Winter, you are used to accomplishing things; what is your notion of the secret?"

"Knowing when to stop exhausting trumps, I reckon—but you don't play cards."

"It is the same old game whatever you play," said the railway king. He did not pursue the discussion; his questions, Winter had found, invariably had a purpose, and that purpose was never argument. He lay back on the big leather

cushions of the lounge, his long, lean fingers drumming on the table beside him and an odd smile playing about the corners of his mouth; his next speech dived into new waters. He said: "Have those men from New York got Atkins, yet?"

"They couldn't find him," answered the colonel. "I have been having him shadowed, on my own idea—I think he stabbed you, though I have no proof of it; I take it you have proof of your matter."

"Plenty," said Keatcham. "I was going to send him to the pen in self-defense. It isn't safe for me to have it creep out that my secretary made a fortune selling my secrets. Besides, I don't want to be killed. You say they can't find him?"

"Seems to have gone to Japan—"

"Seems? What do you mean?"

"I am not sure. He was booked for a steamer; and a man under his name, of his build and color, did actually sail on the boat," announced the colonel blandly.

"Hmn! He's right here in San Francisco; read that note."

Winter read the note, written on Palace Hotel

note-paper, in a sharp, scrawling, Italian hand. The contents were sufficiently startling.

Dear friend Hoping this find you well. Why do you disregard a true Warning? We did write you afore once for say you give that money or we shal be unfortunately compel to kill you quick. No? You laff. God knows we got have that twenty-five thousan dol. Yes. And now because of such great expence it is fifty thousan you shall pay. We did not mean kill you dead only show you for sure there is no place so secret you can Hide no place so strong can defend you. Be Warn. You come with $50000.00 in $100 bills. You go or send Mr. Mercer to the Red Hat; ask for Louis. Say to Louis For the Black Hand. Louis will say For the Black Hand. You follow him. No harm will come to you. You will be forgive all heretobefores. Elseways you must die April 15–20. *This is sure.* You have felt our dagger the other is worse.

You well wishing Fren,
The Black Hand.

"Sounds like Atkins pretending to be a Dago," said the colonel dryly. "I could do better myself."

"Very likely," said Keatcham.

"Does he mean business? What's he after?"

"To get me out of the way. He knows he isn't safe until I'm dead. Then he hasn't been cleaned out, but he has lost a lot of money in this Midland business. The cipher he has is of no use to him, there, or in the other things which unluckily he

knows about. With me dead and the cipher in his hands, he could have made millions; even without the cipher, if he knows I'm dead before the rest of the world, he ought to make at least a half-million. I think you will find that he has put everything he has on the chance. I told you he was slick. And unstable. What do you anticipate he will do? Straight, with no chaser, as you say."

"Well, straight with no chaser, I should say a bomb was the meanest trick in sight, so, naturally, he will choose a bomb."

"I agree with you. You say the house is patrolled?"

"The whole place. But we'll put on a bigger force; I'll see Birdsall at once. Atkins would have to hire his explosive talent, wouldn't he?" questioned the colonel.

"Oh, he knows plenty of the under-world rascals; and besides, for a fellow of his habits, there is a big chance for loot. Mrs. Millicent Winter tells me that your aunt has valuable jewels with her. If she told me, she may have told other people, and Atkins may know. He will use other people, but he will come, too, in my opinion."

"I see," said the colonel; "to make sure they don't foozle the bomb. But he'll have his alibi

ready all right. Mr. Keatcham, did they send you a previous letter?"

"Oh, dear no; that's only part of the game; makes a better story. So is using the hotel paper; if it throws suspicion on anybody it would be your party; you see Atkins knew Mercer had a grudge against me as well as him. He was counting on that. I rather wonder that he didn't fix up some proof for you to find."

"By Jove!" cried the colonel; "maybe he did."

"And you didn't find it?"

"Well, you see I was too busy with you; the others must have overlooked it. Hard on Atkins after he took so much trouble, wasn't it?"

"I told you he was too subtle. But it is not wise to underrate him, or bombs either; we must get the women and those boys out of the house."

"But how? You are not really acquainted with my aunt, Mrs. Rebecca Winter, I take it."

"You think she wouldn't go if there was any chance of danger?"

"You couldn't fire her unless out of a cannon; but she would help get Archie away; Mrs. Melville and Miss Smith—"

"Well—ur—Miss Smith, I am afraid, will not be easy to manage; you see, she knows—"

"Knows? Did you tell her?" asked Colonel Winter anxiously.

"Well, not exactly. As the children say, it told itself. There has been a kind of an attempt, already. A box came, marked from a man I know in New York, properly labeled with express company's labels. Miss Smith opened it; I could see her, because she was in the bath-room with the door open. There was another box inside, wrapped in white tissue paper. Very neatly. She examined that box with singular care and then she drew some water in the lavatory basin, half opened the box and put the whole thing under water in the basin. Then I thought it was time for me and I asked her if it was a bomb. Do you know that girl had sense enough not to try to deceive me? She saw that I had seen every move she had made. She said merely that it was safe under water. It was an ingenious little affair which had an electrical arrangement for touching off a spark when the lid of the box would be lifted."

"Ah, yes. Thoughtful little plan to amuse an invalid by letting him open the box, himself, to see the nice surprises from New York. Very neat, indeed. What did you do with the box?"

"Nothing, so far. It only came about an hour ago."

"Do you reckon some of the Black Hands are out on the street, rubbering to see if there are any signs of anything doing?"

"Perhaps; you might let Birdsall keep a watch for anything like that. But they hear, somehow; there is a leak somewhere in our establishment. It is not your aunt; she can hold her tongue as well as use it; the boy, Archie, does not know anything to tell—"

"He wouldn't tell it if he did," interrupted the colonel; and very concisely but with evident pride he gave Archie's experience in the Chinese quarter.

Keatcham's comment took the listener's breath away; so far afield was it and so unlike his experience of the man; it was: "Winter, a son like that would be a good deal of a comfort, wouldn't he?"

"Poor little chap!" said Winter. "He hasn't any father to be proud of him—father and mother both dead."

Keatcham eyed Winter thoughtfully a moment, then he said: "You've been married and lost children, your aunt says. That must be hard.

But—did you ever read that poem of James Whitcomb Riley's to his friend whose child was dead? It's true what he says—they were better off than he 'who had no child to die.' "

Rupert was looking away from the speaker with the instinctive embarrassment of a man who surprises the deeper feelings of another. He could see out of the window the lovely April garden and Janet Smith amid the almond blossoms. Only her shining black head and her white shoulders and bodice rose above the pink clusters. She looked up and nodded, seeing him; her face was a little pale, but she was smiling.

"I don't know," he said, "it's hard enough either way for a man."

"I never lost any children"—Keatcham's tone was dry, still, but it had not quite the former desiccated quality—"but I was married, for a little while. If it's as bad to lose your children as it is to lose the hope of having them, it—must be hard. You lost your wife, too?"

"Yes," said Rupert Winter.

At this moment he became conscious that Keatcham was avoiding his gaze in the very manner of his avoiding of Keatcham's a moment ago; and it gave him a bewildering sensation.

"I wanted to marry my wife for seven years before we were married," Keatcham continued in that carefully monotonous voice. "She was the daughter of the superintendent of the mine where I was working. I was only eighteen when I first saw her. I was twenty-five when we were married. She used to give me lessons; she was educated and accomplished. She did more than is easy telling, for me. Of course, her parents were opposed at first because they looked higher for her, but she brought them round by her patience and her sweetness and her faith in me. Six months after we were married, she had an accident which left her a helpless invalid in a wheeled chair, at the best; at the worst, suffering—you've known what it is to see anybody, whom you care for, in horrible pain and trying not to show it when you come near?"

"I have," said Winter; "merry hell, isn't it?"

"I have seen that expression," said Keatcham; "I never recognized its peculiar appropriateness before. Yes, it is that. Yet, Winter, those two years she lived afterwards were the happiest of my whole life. She said, the last night she was with me, that they had been the happiest of hers." The same flush which once before, when he had

seemed moved, had crept up to his temples, burned his hollow cheeks. He was holding the edge of the table with the tips of his fingers and the blood settled about the nails with the pressure of his grip. There was an intense moment during which Winter vainly struggled to think of something to say and looked more of his sympathy than he was aware; then: "Cary Mercer needn't think that he has had all the hard times in the world!" said Keatcham in his usual toneless voice, relaxing his hold and leaning back on his pillows. The color ebbed away gradually from his face.

"I don't wonder you didn't marry again," said Winter.

"You would not wonder if you had known Helen. She always understood. Of course, now, at sixty-one, I could buy a pretty, innocent, young girl who would do as her parents bade her, and cry her eyes out before the wedding, or a handsome and brilliant society woman with plenty of matrimonial experience—but I don't want them. I should have to explain myself to them; I don't know how to explain myself; you see I can't half do it—"

"I reckon I understand a little."

"I guess you do. You are different, too. Well,

let's get down to business, think up some way of getting the women out of the house; and get your sleuths after Atkins. It is 'we get him, or he gets us!' "

The amateur secretary assented and prepared to go, for the valet was at the door, ready to relieve him; but opposite Keatcham, he paused a second, made a pretense of hunting for his hat, picked it up in his left hand and held out the right hand, saying, "Well, take care of yourself."

Keatcham nodded; he shook the hand with a good firm pressure. "Much obliged, Winter," said he.

"Well," meditated the soldier as he went his way, "I never did think to take that financial bucaneer by the hand; but—it wasn't the bucaneer, it was the real Edwin Keatcham."

CHAPTER XVII

IN WHICH THE PUZZLE FALLS INTO PLACE

While the colonel was trying to decipher his tragical puzzle, while Edwin Keatcham was busied with plans that affected empires and incidentally were to save and to extinguish some human lives, while Janet Smith had her own troubles, while Mrs. Rebecca Winter enjoyed a game more exciting and deadly than Penelope's Web, Mrs. Millicent Winter and the younger people found the days full of joyous business. The household had fallen into normal ways of living. Although the secret patrol watched every rod of approach to the house, the espial was so unobtrusive that guests came and went, tradesmen rattled over the driveways; the policemen, themselves, slumbered by day and loitered majestically by night without the Casa Fuerte portals, never suspecting. Little Birdsall had his admirable points; they were now in evidence. To all out-

ward seeming, a pleasant house-party was enjoying the lavish Californian hospitality of Casa Fuerte; and Black Care was bundled off to the closet with the family skeleton, according to the traditions of mannerly people. Arnold had opened his garage and his stables. There was bridge of an evening; and the billiard-balls clinked on the pool-table. Archie could now back the electric motor into almost any predicament. The new Chinese chef was a wonder and Tracy was initiating him into the possibilities of the Fireless, despite a modest shrinking on the part of the oriental artist who considered it to be a new kind of bomb.

Millicent, encouraged by Arnold, had had Mrs. Wigglesworth and two errant Daughters, whose husbands were state regents for Melville's university, to luncheon and to dinner; the versatile Kito donning a chauffeur's livery and motoring them back to the city in the Limousine, on both occasions; all of which redounded to Millicent's own proper glory and state.

Indeed, about this time, Millicent was in high good humor with her world. Even Janet Smith was no longer politely obliterated as "the nurse," but became "our dear Miss Janet"; and was pre-

sented with two of Mrs. Melville's last year's Christmas gifts which she could not contrive to use; therefore carried about for general decorative generosity. One was a sage-green linen handkerchief case, quite fresh, on which was etched, in brown silk, the humorous inscription: "WIPE ME BUT DO NOT SWIPE ME!" The other was a white celluloid brush-broom holder bedecked with azure forget-me-nots enframing a complicated monogram which might just as well stand for J. B. B. S. (Janet Byrd Brandon Smith) as for M. S. W. (Millicent Sears Winter) or any other alphabetical herd. These unpretending but (considering their source) distinguished gifts she bestowed in the kindest manner. Janet was no doubt grateful; she embroidered half a dozen luncheon napkins with Mrs. Melville's monogram and crest, in sign thereof; and very prettily, she being a skilful needle-woman. On her part, Mrs. Mellville was so pleased that she remarked to her brother-in-law, shortly after, that she believed Cousin Angela's sisters hadn't been just to Miss Smith; she was a nice girl; and if she married (which is quite possible, insinuated Mrs. Melville archly), she meant to give a tea in her honor.

"Now, that's right decent of you, Millie," cried the colonel; and he smiled gratefully after Mrs. Melville's beautifully fitted back. Yet a scant five minutes before he had been pursuing that same charming back through the garden terraces, in a most unbrotherly frame, resolved to give his sister-in-law a "warning with a fog-horn." The cause of said warning was his discovery of her acquaintance with Atkins. For days a bit of information had been blistering his mind. It came from the girl at the telegraph office at the Palace, not in a bee-line, but indirectly, through her chum, the girl who booked the theater tickets. It could not be analyzed properly because the telegraph girl was gone to Southern California. But before she went she told the theater girl that the lady who received Mr. Makers' wires was one of Mrs. Winter's party! This bit of information was like a live coal underfoot in the colonel's mind; whenever he trod on it in his mental excursions he jumped.

"Who else but Janet?" he demanded. But by degrees he became first doubtful, then daring. He had Birdsall fetch the telegraph girl back to San Francisco. A ten minutes' interview assured him that it was his brother's wife who had called for

Mr. Makers' messages, armed with Mr. Makers' order.

Aunt Rebecca was not nearly so vehement as he when he told her. She listened to his angry criticism with a lurking smile and a little shrug of her shoulders.

"Of course she has butted in, as you tersely express it, in the language of this mannerless generation; Millicent always butts in. How did she get acquainted with this unpleasant, assassinating, poor white trash? My dear child, *she* didn't probably; he made an acquaintance with her. He pumped her and lied to her. We know he wanted to find out Mr. Keatcham's abode; he may have got his clue from her; she knew young Arnold had been to see him. There's no telling. I only know that in the interest of keeping a roof over our heads and having our heads whole instead of in pieces from explosives, I butted in a few days ago when somebody wanted Mrs. Melville Winter on the telephone. I answered it. The person asked if I was Mrs. Melville Winter; it was a strange man's voice. I don't believe in Christian Science or theosophy or psychics, but I do believe I felt in my bones that here was an occasion to be canny rather than conscientious. You know

I can talk like Millicent—or anybody else; so I intoned through the telephone in her silken Anglican accents, '*Do* you want Mrs. Melville Winter or Aunt Rebecca, *Madam* Winter?' I hate to be called Madam Winter, and she knows it, but Millicent is catty, you know, and she always calls me Madam Winter behind my back. The fellow fell into the trap at once—recognized the voice, I dare say, and announced that it was Mr. Makers; Mr. Atkins, who had left for Japan, had not been able to pay his respects and say good-by; but he had left with him an embroidered Chinese kimono for Professor Winter, whom he had admired so much; and if it wouldn't be too much trouble for her to pay a visit to her friend—one of those women she had to luncheon, who's at the St. Francis—he would like to show her several left by Mr. Atkins, for her to select one. Then in the most casual way, he asked after Mr. Keatcham's health. I believed he was improving; had had a very good night. I fancy it didn't please him, but he made a good pretense. Then he went off into remarks about its being such a pity Mr. Atkins had left Mr. Keatcham; but he was so conscientious, a Southern gentleman I knew; yet he really thought a great deal still of

Mr. Keatcham, who had many fine qualities; only on account of the unfortunate differences—Atkins was so proud and sensitive; he was anxious to hear, but not for the world would he have any one know that he had inquired; so would I be very careful not to let any one know he had asked. Of course I would be; I promised effusively; and said I quite understood. I think I *do,* too."

"They are keeping tab on us through Millicent," fumed the colonel. "I dare say she gave it away that Arnold was visiting Keatcham at the hotel; and it wouldn't take Atkins long to piece out a good deal more, especially if his spy overheard Tracy's 'phone. Well, I shall warn Millicent—with a fog-horn!"

The way he warned Millicent has been related. But from Millicent he deflected to another subject—the impulse of confession being strong upon him. He freed his mind about the stains on Cary Mercer's cuffs; and, when at last he sought Millicent he was in his soul praising his aunt for a wise old woman. After justice was disarmed by his miscomprehension of Millicent's words, he took out his cigarette case and began pacing the garden walks, smoking and humming a little

Spanish love song, far older than the statehood of California.

La noche está serena, tranquilo el aquilon;
Tu dulce centinella te guarda el corazon.
Y en al as de los céfiros, que vagan por doquier,
Volando van mis suplicas, á ti, bella mujer!
Volando van mis suplicas, á ti, bella mujer!

De un corazon que te ama, recibe el tierno amor;
No aumentes mas la llama, piedad, á un trobador.
Y si te mueve á lastima eterno padecer,
Como te amo, amama, bellissima mujer!
*Como te amo, amama, bellissima mujer!**

*So still and calm the night is,
The very winds asleep,
My heart's so tender sentinel
His watch and ward doth keep.
And on the wings of zephyrs soft
That wander how they will,
To thee, O woman fair, to thee
My prayers go fluttering still.

Oh, take the heart's love to thy heart
Of one that doth adore!
Have pity, add not to the flame
That burns thy troubadour!
And if compassion stirs thy breast
For my eternal woe,
Oh, as I love thee, loveliest
Of women, love me so!

The words belonged to the air which he had whistled a weary week ago. Young Tracy came along, and caught up the air, although he was innocent of Spanish; he had his mandolin on his arm; he proffered it to the colonel.

"Miss Janet has been singing coon songs to his nibs, who is really getting almost human," he observed affably; "well, a little patience and interest will reveal new possibilities of the Fireless Stove! In man or metal. Shall we get under his nibs' window and give him the *Bedouin Love Song* and *I Picked Me a Lemon in the Garden of Love* and the Sextette from *Lucia* and other choice selections? He seemed to be sitting up and taking notice; let's lift him above the sordid thoughts of Wall Street and his plans for busting other financiers."

The soldier gave this persiflage no answer; his own thoughts were far from gay. He stood drinking in the beauty of the April night. The air was wonderfully hushed and clear; and the play of the moonlight on the great heliotrope bushes and the rose-trees, which dangled their clusters of yellow and white over the stone parapets of the balconies, tinted the leafage and flickered delicately over the tracery of shadow on the gray

walls. Not a cloud flecked the vast aërial landscape—only stars beyond stars, through unfathomable depths of dim violet, and beneath the stars a pale moon swimming low in the heavens; one could see it between the spandrels of the arches spanning the colonnade.

"Looks like a prize night-scene on the stage, doesn't it?" said Tracy. "Jolly good shadows—and aren't these walls bulging out at the bottom bully? I used to know the right name for such architectural stunts when I was taking Fine Arts Four—dreadful to neglect your educational advantages and then forget all the little you didn't neglect, ain't it? I say, get on to those balconies—that isn't the right word for the mission style, I guess; but never mind; aren't they stunning? Do you see the ladies up there? Is that Archie sniggering? What do you think of the haunted house, *now,* Colonel?"

Tracy's gay eyes sought the other's gaze to find it turn somber. Winter couldn't have told why; but a sudden realization of the hideous peril dogging the warm, lighted, tenanted house, submerged him and suffocated him like a foul gas. Let their guards be vigilant as fear, let their wonderful new search-light flood rock and slope

and dusky chaparral bush; and peer as it might through the forest aisles beyond; yet—yet—who could tell!

But he forced an equal smile in a second for the college boy; and chatted easily enough as they climbed up the stepped arches to the balcony and the little group looking seaward.

Aunt Rebecca in black lace and jewels was tilting with the world in general and Millicent Winter in particular; she displayed her most cynical mood. She had demolished democracy; had planted herself firmly on the basic doctrine that the virtues cultivated by slavery far outnumber its inseparable vices; and that most people, if not all, need a master; had been picturesquely and inaccurately eloquent on the subject of dynamite (which she pronounced the logical fourth dimension of liberty, fraternity and equality); had put the yellow rich where they belonged; and the red anarchists mainly under the sod; and she had abolished the Fourth of July to the last sputter of fire-cracker; thence by easy transitions she had extolled American art (which American patrons were too ignorant to appreciate), deplored American music ("The trouble isn't that it is *canned*," says she, "but that it was spoiled before

they canned it!") and was now driving a chariot of fire through American literature; as for the Academics, they never said what they thought, but only what they thought they ought to think; and they always mistook anemia for refinement, as another school mistook yelling and perspiring for vigor.

Just as Winter modestly entered the arena, no less a personage than Henry James was under the wheels. Janet Smith had modestly confessed to believing him a consummate artist; and Millicent in an orotund voice declared that he went deep, deep down into the mysteries of life.

"I don't deny it; he *ought* to get down deep," returned Aunt Rebecca in her gentlest, softest utterance; "he's always boring."

Mrs. Melville's suppressed agitation made her stays creak.

"Do you really think that James is not a great artist?" she breathed.

"I think he is not worth while."

"Wow!" cried Tracy. "Oh, I say—"

"Aunt Rebecca; you can not mean—" this was Mrs. Melville, choking with horror.

"His style," repeated the unmoved iconoclast, "his style has the remains of great beauty; all his

separate phrases, if you wish, are gems; and he is a literary lapidary; but his sentences are so subtle, so complex, so intricately compounded, and so discursive that I get a pain in the back of my neck before I find out what he *may* mean; and then—I don't agree with him! Now is it worth while to put in so much hard reading only to be irritated?"

"I beg pardon," Winter interposed, with masculine pusillanimity evading taking sides in the question at issue, "I thought we were going to have some music; why don't you boys give us some college songs? Here is a mandolin."

Aunt Rebecca's still luminous eyes went from the speaker to Janet Smith in the corner. She said something about hearing the music better from the other side of the balcony. Now (as Mrs. Millicent very truly explained) there was not a ha'pennyworth's difference in favor of one side over the other; but she followed in the wake of her imperious aunt.

The colonel drew nearer to Janet Smith; in order to sink his voice below disturbing the music-lovers he found it necessary to sit on a pile of cushions at her feet.

"Did you know Mercer will be back to-night?" he began, a long way from his ultimate object.

He noticed that leaning back in the shadow her ready smile had dropped from her face, which looked tired. "I want to tell you a little story about Mercer," he continued; "may I? It won't take long."

He was aware, and it gave him a twinge of pain to see it, that she sat up a little straighter, like one on guard; and oh, how tired her face was and how sweet! He told her of all his suspicions of her brother-in-law; of the blood-stains and the changing of clothes; she did not interrupt him by a question, hardly by a motion, until he told of the conversation with Keatcham and the note signed "The Black Hand." At this her eyes lighted; she exclaimed impetuously: "Cary Mercer never *did* send that letter!" She drew a deep intake of breath. "I don't believe he touched Mr. Keatcham!"

"Neither do I," said the colonel, "but wait!" He went on to the theater girl's report of the receiver of the telegrams. Her hands, which clasped her knee, fell apart; her lips parted and closed firmly.

"Did I think it was you?" said he. "Why, yes, I confess I did fear it might be and that you might be trying to shield Atkins."

"I!" she exclaimed hotly; "that detestable villain!"

"*Isn't* he?" cried the colonel. "But—well, I couldn't tell how he might strike a lady," he ended lamely.

"I reckon he *would* strike a lady if she were silly enough to marry him and he got tired of her. He is the kind of man who will persecute a girl to marry him, follow her around and importune her and flatter her and then, if he should prevail, never forgive her for the bother she has given him. Oh, I never *did* like him; I'm afraid of him —awfully."

"Not you?"—the colonel's voice was cheerful, as if he had not shivered over his own foreboding vision. "I've seen you in action already, you know."

"Not fighting bombs. I hate bombs. There are so many pieces to hit you. You can't run away."

"Well, you'll find them not so bad; besides, you *did* fight one this very morning, and you were cool as peppermint!"

"That was quite different; I had time to think, and the danger was more to me than to any one else; but to think of Mrs. Winter and Archie and y— all of you; that scares me."

"Now, don't let it get on your nerves," he soothed—of course it is necessary to take a girl's hand to soothe her when she is frightened. But Miss Smith calmly released her hand, only reddening a little; and she laughed. "Where—where were we at?" she asked in her unconscious Southern phraseology.

"Somewhere around Atkins, I think," said the colonel; he laughed in his turn,—he found it easy to laugh, now that he knew how she felt toward Atkins. "You see, after I talked with Keatcham I couldn't make anything but Atkins out of the whole business. But there were those stained cuffs and his changing his clothes—"

"Yes," said she.

"How explain? There was only one explanation: that was, that perhaps Mercer had discovered Keatcham before we did, unconsciously spotted his cuffs, been alarmed by our approach and hidden, lest it should be the murderers returning. He might have wanted a chance to draw his revolver. Say he did that way, he might foolishly pretend to enter for the first time. If he made that mistake and then discovered the condition of his cuffs and the spots on his knee, what would be his natural first impulse? Why, to

change them, trusting that they hadn't been noticed. Maybe, then, he would wash them out—"

"No," murmured Miss Smith meekly, with a little twinkle of her eye; "*I* did that; he hid them. How ridiculous of me to get in such a fright! But you know how Cary hated Mr. Keatcham; and you—no, you don't know the lengths that such a temperament as his will go. I did another silly thing: I found a dagger, one of those Moorish stilettoes that hang in the library; it was lying in the doorway. When no one was looking I hid it and carried it off. I stuck it in one of the flower beds; I stuck it in the ferns; I have stuck that wretched thing all over this yard. I didn't dare carry it back and put it in the empty place with the others because some one might have noticed the place. And I didn't dare say anything to Cary; I was right miserable."

"So was I," said the colonel, "thinking you were trying to protect the murderer. But do you know what I had sense to do?"

"Go to Mrs. Winter? Oh, I *wanted* to!"

"Exactly; and do you know what that dead game sport said to me? She said she found those washed and ironed cuffs and the trousers neatly

cleaned with milka—what's milka?—and the milka cleaned the spots so much cleaner than the rest that she had her own suspicions started. But says she, 'Not being a plumb idiot, I went straight to Cary and he told me the whole story—' "

"Which was like *your* story?"

"Very near. And you see it would be *like* Atkins to leave incriminating testimony round loose. That is, incriminating testimony against Mercer and Tracy. The dagger, Tracy remembers, was not in the library; it was in the *patio*. Right to hand. Atkins must have got in and found Mr. Keatcham on the floor in a faint. Whether he meant to make a bargain with him or to kill him, perhaps we shall never know; but when he saw him helpless before him he believed his chance was come to kill him and get the cipher key, removing his enemy and making his fortune at a blow, as the French say. *Voilà tout!*"

"Do you think"—her voice sank lower; she glanced over her shoulder—"do you reckon *Atkins* had anything to do with that train robbery? Was it a mere pretext to give a chance to murder Mr. Keatcham, fixing the blame on ordinary bandits?"

"By Jove! it might be."

"I don't suppose we shall ever know. But, Colonel Winter, do you mind explaining to me just what Brother Cary's scheme with Mr. Keatcham was? Mrs. Winter told me you would."

"She told *me,*" mused the colonel, "that you didn't know anything about this big game which has netted them millions. They've closed out their deals and have the cash. No paper profits for Auntie! She said that she would not risk your being mixed up in it; so kept you absolutely in the dark. I'm there, too. Didn't you know Mercer had kidnapped Archie?"

"No; I didn't know he was with Mr. Keatcham at the hotel. It would have saved me a heap of suffering; but she didn't dare let me know for fear, if anything should happen, I would be mixed up in it. It was out of kindness, Colonel Winter, truly it was. Afterward when she saw that I was worried she gave me hints that I need not worry, Archie was quite safe."

"And the note-paper?"

"I suppose she gave it to them," answered Miss Smith.

"And the voice I heard in the telephone?" He explained how firmly she had halted the conver-

sation the time Archie would have reassured him. "You weren't there, of course?" said he.

"No, I was down-stairs in the ladies' entrance of the court in the hotel; I had come in a little while before, having carried an advertisement to the paper; I wonder why she—maybe it was to communicate with them without risking a letter."

"But how did *your* voice get into my 'phone?" he asked.

She looked puzzled only a second, then laughed as he had not heard her laugh in San Francisco—a natural, musical, merry peal, a girlish laugh that made his heart bound.

"Why, of course," said she, "it is so easy! There was a reporter who insisted on interviewing Mrs. Winter about her jewelry; and I was shooing him away. Somehow the wires must have crossed."

"Do you remember—this is very, very pretty, don't you think? Just like a puzzle falling into place. Do you remember coming here on the day Archie was returned?"

"I surely do; my head was swimming, for Mrs. Winter sent me and I began then to suspect. She told me Brother Cary was in danger; of course I wanted to do anything to help him; and I carried

a note to him. I didn't go in, merely gave the note and saw him."

"*I* saw you."

"You? How?"

"Birdsall and I; we were here, in the *patio;* we, my dear Miss Janet, were the Danger! You had on a brown checked silk dress and you were holding a wire clipper in your hand."

"Yes, sir. I saw it on the grass and picked it up."

She laughed a little; but directly her cheeks reddened. "What must you have thought of me!" she murmured under her breath; and bit the lip that would have quivered.

"I should like to tell you—*dear,*" he answered, "if you will—O Lord, forgive young men for living! If they are not all coming back to ask me to sing! But, Janet, dear, let me say it in Spanish—yes, *yes* if you really won't be bored; throw me that mandolin."

Aunt Rebecca leaned back in the arm-chair, faintly smiling, while the old, old words that thousands of lovers have thrilled with pain and hopes and dreams beyond their own power of speech and offered to their sweethearts, rose, winged by the eternal longing:

"Y si te mueve á lastima mi eterno padecer,
Como te amo, amame, bellissima mujer!
Como te amo, amame, bellissima mujer!

"And what does it mean in English, Bertie?" said Mrs. Melville. "Can't you translate it?"

"Shall I?" said the colonel, his voice was careless enough, but not so the eyes which looked up at Janet Smith.

"Not to-night, please," said she. "I—I think Mr. Keatcham is expecting me to read to him a little. Good night. Thank you, Colonel Winter."

She was on her feet as she spoke; and Winter did not try to detain her; he had held her hand; and he had felt its shy pressure and caught a fleeting, frightened, very beautiful glance. His dark face paled with the intensity of his emotion.

Janet moved away, quietly and lightly, with no break in her composure; but as she passed Mrs. Winter she bent and kissed her. And when Archie would have run after her a delicate jeweled hand was laid on his arm. "Not to-night, laddie; I want you to help me down the steps."

With her hand on the boy's shoulder she came up to Rupert, and inclined her handsome head in Janet's direction. "I think, by rights, that kiss belonged to you, *mon enfant*," said she.

CHAPTER XVIII

CASA FUERTE

Winter would have said that he was too old a man to stay awake all night, when he had a normal temperature; yet he saw the stars come out and the stars fade on that fateful April night. He entered his room at the hour when midnight brushes the pale skirts of dawn and misguided cocks are vociferating their existence to an indifferent world. Before he came there had been a long council with Mercer and his aunt. Mercer, who had been successful in his mission, had barely seen his chief for a moment before a gentle but imperious nurse ordered him away. Winter caught a queer, abrupt laugh from the financier. The latter beckoned to him. "See you are as obedient as I am when your time comes," he chuckled; and he chuckled again when both the soldier and Miss Smith blushed over his awkward jocoseness. Yet, the next moment he extended his hand with his formal, other-generation cour-

tesy and took Miss Janet's shapely, firm fingers in his own lean and nervous grasp. "Allow me to offer you both my sincere congratulations," began he, and halted, his eyes, which seemed so incurious but were so keen, traveling from the woman's confusion to the man's. "I beg your pardon; I understood—Archie who was here, gave me to understand—and I heard you singing; you will hardly believe it, but years ago *I* sang that to my wife."

"So far as I am concerned, it *is* settled," said the colonel steadily.

"We are all," Keatcham continued, no longer with any trace of embarrassment, as he touched the hand which he still held with his own other hand, "we are all, as you know, my dear young lady, in considerable personal peril; I regret that it should be on my account; but it really is not my fault; it is because I will not relax my pursuit of a great scoundrel who is dangerous to all decent people. But being in such danger, I think you will be glad afterward if you are generously frank, and give up something of the sex's prerogative to keep a lover on the anxious seat. Excuse me if —if I presume on my age and my privileges as a patient."

Janet lifted her sweet eyes and sent one glance as fleeting and light as the flash of a bird's wing. "I—I—reckon it is settled," murmured she; but immediately she was the nurse again. "Mr. Keatcham, you are staying awake much too late. Here is Colvin, who will see to anything you want. Good night."

It was then that Mr. Keatcham had taken the colonel's breath away by kissing Janet's hand; after which he shook hands with the colonel with a strange new cordiality, and watched them both go away together with a look on his gaunt face unlike any known to Colvin.

Only three minutes in the hall, with the moon through the arched window; and his arm about her and the fragrance of her loosened hair against his cheek and her voice stirring his heartstrings with an exquisite pang. Only time for the immemorial questions of love: "Are you sure, dear, it is really *I?*" and "When did you first—" To this last she had answered with her half-humorous, adorable little lilt of a laugh. "Oh, I reckon it was—a—little—all along, ever since I read about your saving that poor little Filipino boy, like Archie; the one who was your servant in Manila, and going hungry for him on the march

and jumping into the rapids to save him—when you were lame, too—"

Here the colonel burst in with a groan: "Oh, that monstrous newspaper liar! The 'dear little Filipino boy' was a married man; and I didn't go hungry for him, and I didn't jump into the river to save him. It wasn't more than wading depth—I only swore at him for an idiot and told him to *walk* out when he tipped over his boat and was floundering about. And he *did!* He was the limit as a liar—"

To his relief, the most sensible as well as the most lovable woman in the world had burst into a delicious fit of laughter; and returned: "Oh, well, you *would* have jumped in and saved him if the water had been deep; it wasn't *your* fault it was shallow!" And just at this point Mercer and Aunt Rebecca must needs come with a most unusual premonitory racket, and Janet had fled.

Afterward had come the council. All the coil had been unraveled. Birdsall appeared in person, as sleek, smiling and complacent over his blunders as ever. One of his first sentences was a declaration of trust in Miss Smith.

"I certainly went off at half-cock there," said he amiably; "and just because she was so awful

nice I felt obliged to suspect her; but I've got the real dog that killed the sheep this time; it's sure the real Red Wull!" It appeared that he had, of a verity, been usefully busy. He had secured the mechanic who had given Atkins a plan of the secret passages of Casa Fuerte. He had found the policeman who had arrested Tracy (he swore because he was going too fast) and the magistrate who had fined him; and not only that, he had captured the policeman, a genuine officer, not a criminal in disguise, who had been Atkins' instrument in kidnapping Archie. This man, whom Birdsall knew how to terrify completely, had confessed that it was purely by chance that Atkins had seen the boy, left outside in the motor car. Atkins, so he said, had pretended that the boy was a tool of some enemies of Keatcham's, whose secretary he was, trading, not for the only time, on his past position. In reality, Birdsall had come to believe Atkins knew that Keatcham was employing Mercer in his place.

"Why, he knew the old gentleman was just off quietly with Mr. Mercer and some friends; knew they were all friendly, just as well as you or me," declared Birdsall. He had seen Archie on the train, for, as the colonel remembered, he had been

in the Winters' car on the night of the robbery. Somehow, also, Atkins had found out about Archie's disappearance from the hotel.

"I can't absolutely put my finger on his information," said Birdsall; "but I *suspect* Mrs. Melville Winter; I know she was talking to him, for one of my men saw her. The lady meant no harm, but she's one of the kind that is always slamming the detectives and being took in by the rascals."

He argued that Mrs. Winter and Miss Smith knew where the boy was; for some reason they had let him go and were pretending not to know where he was. "Ain't that so?" the detective appealed to Aunt Rebecca, who merely smiled, saying: "You're a wonder, Mr. Birdsall!" According to Birdsall's theory, Atkins was puzzled by Archie's part in the affair. But he believed could he find the boy's present hosts he would find Edwin Keatcham. It would not be the first time Keatcham had hidden himself, the better to spin his web for the trapping of his rivals. That Mercer was with his employer the ex-secretary had no manner of doubt, any more than he doubted that Mercer's scheme had been to oust him and to build his own fortunes on Atkins' ruin. He knew both Tracy

and young Arnold very well by sight. When he couldn't frighten Archie into telling anything, probably he went back to his first plan of shadowing the Winter party at the Palace. He must have seen Tracy here. He penetrated his disguise. ("He's as sharp as the devil, I tell you, Colonel.") He either followed him himself or had him followed; and he heard about the telephone. ("Somebody harking in the next room, most likely.") Knowing Tracy's intimacy with Arnold it was not hard for so clever and subtle a mind as Atkins' to jump to the conclusion and test it in the nearest telephone book. ("At least that is how *I* figure it out, Colonel.") Birdsall had traced the clever mechanic who was interrogated by the Eastern gentleman about to build; this man had given the lavish and inquisitive Easterner a plan of the secret passages—to use in his own future residence. Whether Atkins went alone or in company to the Casa Fuerte the detective could only surmise. He couldn't tell whether his object would be mere blackmail, or robbery of the cipher, or assassination. Perhaps he found the insensible man in the *patio* and was tempted by the grisly opportunity; victim and weapon both absolutely to his hand; for it was established that the dagger had been

shown Tracy by Mercer as a curio, and left on the stone bench.

Perhaps he had not found the dagger, but had his own means to make an end of his enemy and his own terror. Birdsall believed that he had accomplices, or at least one accomplice, with him. He conceived that they had lain in ambush watching until they saw Kito go away. Then an entry had been made. "Most like," Birdsall concluded, "he jest flung that dagger away for you folks to find and suspect the domestics, say Kito, 'cause he was away." But this was not all that Birdsall had to report. He had traced Atkins to the haunts of certain unsavory Italians; he had struck the trail, in fine. To be sure, it ran underground and was lost in the brick-walled and slimy-timbered cellars of Chinatown which harbored every sin and crime known to civilization or to savagery. What matter? By grace of his aunt's powerful friend they could track the wolves even through those noisome burrows.

"Yes," sighed the colonel, stretching out his arms, with a resonant breath of relief, "we're out of the maze; all we have to do now is to keep from being killed. Which isn't such a plain proposition in 'Frisco as in Massachusetts! But I

reckon we can tackle it! And then—then, my darling, I shall dare be happy!"

He found himself leaning on his window-sill and staring like a boy on the landscape, lost in the lovely hallucinations of moonlight. It was no scene that he knew, it was a vision of old Spain; and by and by from yonder turret the princess, with violets in her loosened hair and her soft cheek like satin and snow, would lean and look.

Y si te mueve á lastima mi eterno padecer.
Como te amo, amame, bellissima mujer!

"Ah, no, little girl," he muttered with a shake of the head, "I like it better to have you a plain, American gentlewoman, as Aunt Becky would say, who could send me to battle with a nice little quivery smile—*sweetheart!* Oh, I'm not good enough for you, my dear, my dear." He felt an immense humility as he contrasted his own lot with the loneliness of Keatcham and Mercer and the multitude of solitaries in the world, who had lost, or sadder still, had never possessed, the divine dream that is the only reality of the soul. As such thoughts moved his heart, suddenly in the full tide of hope and thankfulness, it stood still, chilled, as if by the glimpse of an iceberg in sum-

mer seas. Yet how absurd; it was only that he had recalled his stoical aunt's most unexpected touch of superstition. Quite in jest he had asked her if she felt any presentiments or queer things in her bones to-night. He expected to be answered that Janet had driven every other anxiety out of her mind; and how was she to break it to Millicent?—or with some such caustic repartee. Instead, she had replied testily: "Yes, I *do,* Bertie. I feel—horrid! I feel as if something out of the common awful were going to happen. It isn't exactly Atkins, either. Do you reckon it could be the *I Suey When,* that bamboo-shoots mess we had for dinner?"

Although they spent a good twenty minutes after that, joking over superstitions, and he had repeated to her some of Tracy's and Arnold's most ingenious "spooky stunts," to make the neighborhood keep its distance from Casa Fuerte, and they had laughed freely, she as heartily as he, nevertheless he divined that her smile was a pretense. Suddenly, an unruly tremor shook his own firm spirits. Looking out on the stepped and lanterned arches of the wing, he was conscious of the same tragic endowment of the darkened pile, which had oppressed him that night, weeks before, when he

had stood outside on the crest of the hill; and the would-be murderers might have been skulking in the shadows of the pepper-trees. He tried vainly to shake off this distempered mood. Although he might succeed for a moment in a lover's absorption, it would come again, insidiously, seeping through his happiness like a fume. After futile attempts to sleep he rose, and still at the bidding of his uncanny and tormenting impulse he took his bath and dressed himself for the day. By this time the ashen tints of dawn were in his chamber and on the fields outside. He stood looking at the unloveliest aspect of nature, a landscape on the sunless side, before the east is red. The air felt lifeless; there were no depths in the pale sky; the azure was a flat tint, opaque and thin, like a poor water-color. While he gazed the motionless trees, live-oaks and olives and palms, were shaken as by a mighty wind; the pepper plumes tossed and streamed and tangled like a banner; the great elms along the avenue bent over in a breaking strain. Yet the silken cord of the Holland window-shade did not so much as swing. There was not a wing's breath of air. But gradually the earth and cloud vibrated with a strange grinding noise which has been described a hundred times, but never ade-

quately; a sickening crepitation, as of the rocks in the hills scraping and splintering. Before the mind could question the sound, there succeeded an anarchy of uproar. In it was jumbled the crash of trees and buildings, the splintering crackle of glass, the boom of huge chimneys falling and of vast explosions, the hiss of steam, the hurling of timbers and bricks and masses of stone or sand, and the awful rush of frantic water escaping from engine or main.

"'Quake, sure's you're born!" said the colonel softly.

Now that his invisible peril was real, was upon him, his spirits leaped up to meet it. He looked coolly about him, noting in his single glance that the house was standing absolutely stanch, neither reeling nor shivering; and that the chimney just opposite his eye had not misplaced a brick. In the same instant he caught up his revolver and ran at his best pace from the room. The hall was firm under his hurrying feet. As he passed the great arched opening on the western balcony he saw an awful sight. Diagonally across from Casa Fuerte was the great house of the California magnate who did not worry his contractor with demands for Colonial honesty of workmanship as

well as Colonial architecture. The stately mansion with its beautiful piazzas and delicate harmony of pillar and pediment, shone white and placid on the eye for a second; then rocked in ghastly wise and collapsed like a house of cards. Simultaneously a torchlike flame streamed into the air. A woeful din of human anguish pierced the inanimate tumult of wreck and crash.

"Bully for Casa Fuerte!" cried the soldier, who now was making a frenzied speed to the other side of the house. He cast a single glance toward the door which he knew belonged to Janet's room; and he thought of the boy, but he ran first to his old aunt. He didn't need to go the whole way. She came out of her door, Janet and Archie at her side. They were all perfectly calm, although in very light and semi-oriental attire. Archie plainly had just plunged out of bed. His eyes were dancing with excitement.

"This house is a dandy, ain't it, Uncle Bertie?" he exclaimed. "Mr. Arnold told me all about the way his father built it; he said it wouldn't bat its eye for an earthquake. It didn't either; but that house opposite is just kindling-wood! Say! here's Cousin Cary; and—look, Uncle Bertie, Mr. Keatcham has got up and he's all dressed. Hullo,

Colvin! Don't be scared. It's only a 'quake!" Colvin grinned a sickly grin and stammered, "Yes, sir, quite so, sir." Not an earthquake could shake Colvin out of his manners.

"Are you able to do this, Mr. Keatcham?" young Arnold called breathlessly, plunging into the *patio* to which they had all instinctively gravitated. Keatcham laughed a short, grunting laugh. "Don't you understand, this is no little every-day 'quake? Look out! Is there a way you can look and not see a spout of flame? I've got to go down-town. Are the machines all right?"

"We must find Randall; the poor soul has a mortal terror of 'quakes—" Aunt Rebecca's well-bred accents were unruffled; she appeared a thought stimulated, nothing more; danger always acted as tonic on Winter nerves—"Archie, you go put your clothes on this minute, honey. And I suppose we ought to look up Millicent."

The colonel, however, had barely set foot on the threshold when Mrs. Melville appeared, propelling Randall, whom she had rescued from the maid's closet where she was cowering behind her neat frocks, momently expecting death, but decently ready for it in gown and shoes. Mrs. Melville herself, in the disorder of the shock, had

merely added her best Paris hat and a skeleton bustle to her dainty nightgear. She had not forgotten her kimono; she had only forgotten to don it; and it draggled over her free arm. But her dignity was intact. The instant she beheld her kindred she demanded of them, as if they were responsible, whether *this* was a sample of the Californian climate. Keatcham blushed and fled with Colvin and the giggling Arnold and Archie, who was too polite to giggle.

Mrs. Winter put on her eye-glasses. "Millicent," said she in the gentlest of tones, "your bustle is on crooked."

One wild glance at the merciless mirror in the carved pier-glass did Mrs. Melville give, and, then, without a word, she fled.

"Randall," said Mrs. Winter, "you look very nice; come and help me dress. There will most likely be some more shocks."

Randall, trembling in every limb, but instinctively assuming a composed mien, followed the undaunted old lady.

The colonel was going in another direction, having heard a telephone bell. He was most anxious to put himself into communication with Birdsall, because not even during the earthquake had

he forgotten an uglier peril; and it had occurred to him that Atkins was of a temper not to be frightened by the convulsions of order; but rather to make his account of it. Nor did the message through the telephone tend to reassure him.

The man at the other end of the telephone was Birdsall. No telling how long the telephone service would keep up, he reported; wires were down around the corner; worse, the water mains were spouting; and from where he stood since he felt the first shock he had counted thirty-six fires. Ten of them were down in the quarter where some of his men had homes; and a field-glass had shown that the houses were all tossed about there; he couldn't keep his men steady; it seemed inhuman to ask them to stay when their wives and children might be dying; of course it was his damn luck to have all married men from down there.

"Well, I reckon you will have to let them go; but watch out," begged the colonel, "for you know the men we are after will take advantage of general disorder to get in their dirty work. Now is the most dangerous time."

Birdsall knew it; he had had intimations that some men were trying to sneak up the hill; they had been turned back. They pretended to be some

wandering railway workers; but Birdsall distrusted them. He—No use to ring! Vain to tap the carriage of the receiver! The telephone was dead, jarred out of existence somewhere beyond their ken.

By this time the cold sunlight of the woefulest day that San Francisco had ever seen was spread over the earth. The city was spotted with blood-red spouts of flames. The ruin of the earthquake had hardly been visible from their distance, although it was ugly enough and of real importance; but, even in the brief space which they in Casa Fuerte had waited before they should set forth, fires had enkindled in all directions, most dreadful to see; nor did there seem to be any check upon them.

Tracy had waked the domestic staff, and, dazed but stoical, they were getting breakfast. But Keatcham could not wait; he was in a cold fury of haste to get to the town.

He had consented to wait for his breakfast under Miss Smith's representation that it would be ready at once and her assurance that he couldn't work through the day without it.

"Happily, Archie," explained Tracy, whose unquenchable college levity no earthquake could af-

fect, "happily my domestic jewel has been stocked up with rice and oatmeal, two of the most nutritious of foods; and Miss Janet is making coffee on her traveling coffee pot for the Boss. That's alcohol, and independent of gas-mains. Lucky; for the gas-range is out of action, and we have to try charcoal. Notice one interesting thing, Archie? Old Keatcham, whom we were fighting tooth and nail three weeks ago, is now bossing us as ruthlessly as a foot-ball coach; and Cousin Cary is taking his slack talk as meek as a freshman. Great old boy, Keatcham! And—oh, I say! has any one gone to the rescue of the Rogerses? I saw Kito speeding over that way from the garage and Haley hiking after him. I hope the nine small yellow domestics are not burned at the stake with Rogers; the bally fire-trap is blazing like a tar-barrel!"

As it happened, the colonel had despatched a small party to their neighbor's aid. Haley and Kito were not among them; they were to guard the garage which was too vital a point in their household economy to leave unprotected. Nevertheless, Haley and Kito did both run away, leaving a Mexican helper to watch; and when they returned they were breathless and Haley's face

was covered with blood. He was carefully carrying something covered with a carriage-robe in his hand.

"I've the honor to report, sir," Haley mumbled, stiff and straight in his military posture, a very grimy and blood-stained hand at salute, "I've the honor to report, sor, that Private Kito and me discovered two sushpicious characters making up the hillside by the sekrut road. We purshooed thim, sor, and whin they wu'dn't halt we fired on thim, sor, ixploding this here bum which wint off whin the hindmost man tumbled."

Kito smilingly flung aside the carriage-robe, disclosing the still smoking shell of an ingenious round bomb, very similar to those used in fireworks.

The colonel examined it closely; it was an ugly bit of dynamite craft.

"Any casualties, Sergeant?" the colonel asked grimly.

"Yes, sor. The man wid the bum was kilt be the ixplosion; the other man was hit by Private Kito and wounded in the shoulder but escaped. I mesilf have a confusion on me right arrum, me ankle is sprained; and ivery tooth in me head is in me pockit! That's all."

"Report to Miss Smith at the hospital, Sergeant. Any further report?"

"I wu'd like to riccommind Private Kito for honorable minshun for gallanthry."

"I shall certainly remember him; and you also, Sergeant, in any report that I may make. Look after the garage, Kito."

Kito bowed and retired, beaming, while Haley hobbled into the house. The consequences of the attack made on the garage did not appear at once. One was that young Arnold had already brought the touring car into the *patio* in the absence of Haley and Kito. Another was that he and Tracy and Kito all repaired to the scene of the explosion to examine the dead man's body. They returned almost immediately, but for a few moments there was no one of the house in the court. The colonel went to Keatcham in a final effort to dissuade him from going into the city until after he himself had gone to the Presidio and returned with a guard. He represented as forcibly as he could the danger of Keatcham's appearance during a time of such tumult and lawlessness.

"We are down to the primeval passions now," he pleaded. "Do you suppose if it had been Haley instead of that dago out there who was killed that

we could have punished the murderer? Not unless we did it with our own hands. They are maybe lying in wait at the first street-corner now. If you will only wait—"

Keatcham chopped off his sentence without ceremony, not irritably, but with the brusquerie of one whose time is too precious for dilatory amenities.

"Will the *fire* wait?" he demanded. "Will the thieves and toughs and ruffians whom we have to crush before they realize their strength, will *they* wait? This is *my* town, Winter, the only town I care a rap for; and I propose to help save it. I can. Danger? Of course there is danger; there is danger in every battle; but do you keep out of battles where you belong because you may get killed? This is my affair; if I get killed it is in the way of business, and I can't help it! No, Arnold, I won't have your father's son mixed up in my fights; you can't go."

"Somebody has to run the machine, sir," insinuated young Arnold with a coaxing smile; "and I fancy I shouldn't be my father's son if I didn't look after my guest—not very long; he'd cut me out. Tracy is going, too, he's armed—"

"You are not both going," said the colonel;

"somebody with a head on him must stay here to guard the ladies."

He would have detailed both Tracy and Mercer; but Mercer could really help Keatcham better than any one in any business arrangements which might need to be made. And Keatcham plainly wished his company. Had not the situation been so grimly serious Winter could have laughed at the grotesque reversal of their conditions; Tracy and Arnold did laugh; they were all taking their orders from the man who had been their defeated prisoner a little while back. Mercer alone kept his melancholy poise; he had obtained the aim of years; he was not sure but his revenge was subtler and completer than he had dared to hope. Being a zealot he was possessed by his dreams. Suppose he had converted this relentless and tremendous power to his own way of faith; what mightn't he hope to accomplish? Meanwhile, so far as the business in hand was concerned, he believed in Keatcham and in Keatcham's methods of help; he bowed to the innate power of the man; and he was as simply obedient and loyal as Kito would have been to his feudal lord.

In a very brief time all the arrangements were made; the four men went into the *patio* to enter

the touring-car. They walked up to the empty machine. The colonel stepped into the front seat of the machine. Something in the noise of the engine which was panting and straining against its control, some tiny sibilant undertone which any other ear would have missed, warned his; he bent quickly. A dark object gyrated above the heads of the other two just mounting the long step; it landed with a prodigious splash in the fountain, flying into a multitude of sputtering atoms and hurling a great column of water high up in air. Unheeding its shrieking clamor, the soldier sprang over the side of the car, darted through the great arched doorway out upon the terrace toward a clump of rubber-trees. He fired; again he fired.

In every catastrophe the spectators' minds lose some parts of the action. There are blanks to be supplied by no one. Every one of the men and women present on that fatal morning had a different story. Colvin was packing; he could only remember the deafening roar and the shouting; and when he got down-stairs and saw—he turned deadly sick; his chief impression is the backs of people and the way their hands would shake. Janet Smith, inside, dressing Haley's wounds,

was first warned by the tumult and cries; she as well as Archie and Haley who were with her could see nothing until they got outside. All Mrs. Melville saw was the glistening back of the car and Mercer stepping into the car and instantly lurching backward. The explosion seemed to her simultaneous with Mercer's entering the car. But Mrs. Rebecca Winter, who perhaps had the coolest head of all, and who was standing on the dais of the arcade exactly opposite the car, distinctly saw Keatcham with an amazing exertion of vigor for a man just risen from a sick-bed, and with a kind of whirling motion, literally hurl Mercer out of the car. She is sure of this because of one homely little detail, sickening in its very homeliness. As he clutched Mercer Keatcham's soft gray hat dropped off and the light burnished the bald dome of his head. In the space of that glance she heard a crackle and a roar and Kito screamed in Japanese, running in from the carriage side. She can not tell whether Tracy or Arnold reached the mangled creature on the pavement first. Arnold only remembers how the carriage-robe flapped in Tracy's shaking hands before he flung it over the man. Tracy's fair skin was a streaky, bluish white, and his under jaw kept moving up

and down like that of a fish out of water, while he gasped, never uttering a sound.

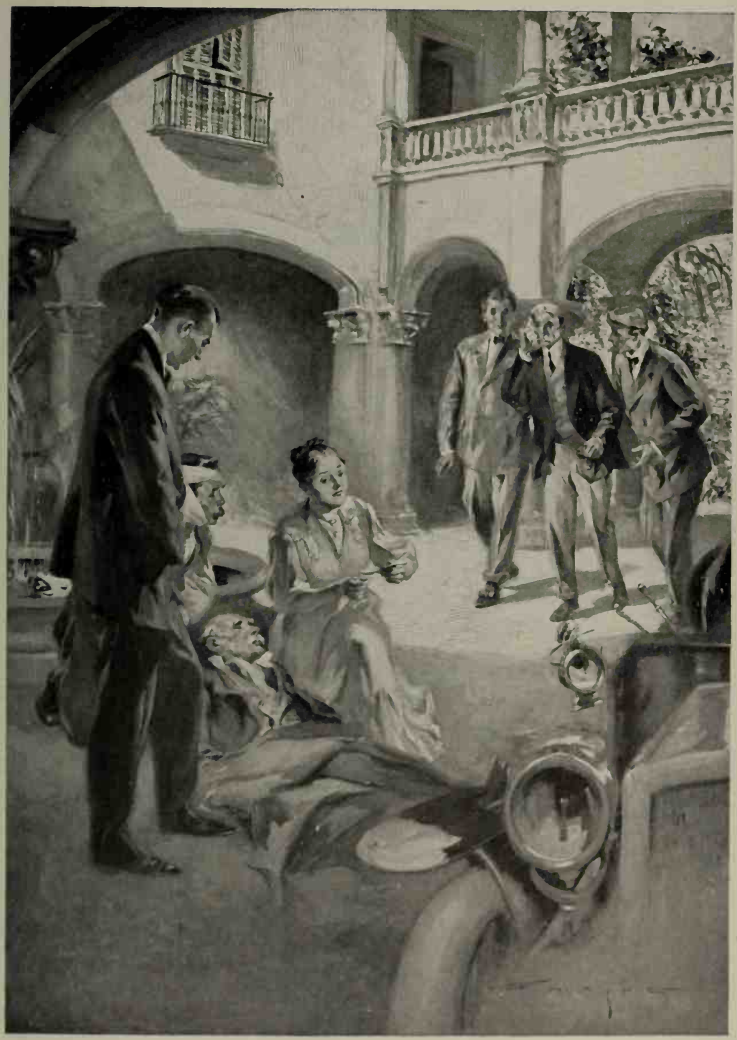
Young Arnold was trembling so that his hands shook when he would have raised the wounded man. Mercer alone was composed although deathly pale. He had the presence of mind to throw the harmless fragments of the bomb into the fountain and to examine the interior of the car lest there should be more of destruction hidden therein. Then he approached the heap on the flags; but Keatcham was able to motion him away, saying in his old voice, not softened in the least: "Don't you do that! I'm all in. No use. They got me. But it won't do them any good; you boys know that will you witnessed; it gives a fifty thousand for the arrest and conviction or the killing of Atkins; his own cutthroats will betray him for that. But—where's Winter? You damn careless fools didn't let *him* get hurt?"

"Shure, sor, he didn't let himsilf git hurted," Haley blurted out; he had run in after Miss Smith, brandy bottle in hand; "'tis the murdering dagoes is gettin' hurted off there behind the big rubber-trees; I kin see the dead legs of thim, this minnit. 'Tis a grand cool shot the colonel is, sor."

"Bring him in, let them go; they were only

tools," panted Keatcham weakly; but the brandy revived him; and his lips curled in a faint smile as Janet Smith struck a match to heat the teaspoonful of water for her hypodermic. "Make it good and strong, give me time to say something to Mercer and Winter—there he comes; good runners those boys are!"

Tracy and Arnold, acting on a common unspoken impulse, had dashed after Winter and were pushing him forward between them. Keatcham was nearly spent, but he rallied to say the words in his mind. He kept death at bay by the sheer force of his will. When Winter knelt down beside him, with a poignant memory of another time in the same place when he had knelt beside a seemingly dying man, and gently touched the unmarred right hand lying on the carriage-robe, he could still form a smile with his stiff lips and mutter: "Only thing about me isn't in tatters; of course you touched it and didn't try to lift me where I'm all in pieces. You always understood. Listen! You, too, Mercer. Winter knows the things I'm bound to have go through. I've explained them to him. You'll be my executors and trustees? A hundred thousand a year; not too big a salary for the work—you can do it. It's a



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bigger job than the army one, Winter. Warnebold will look after the other end. He's narrow but he is straight. I've made it worth his while. Some loose ends—it can't be helped now. Maybe you'll find out there are more difficulties in administering a big fortune than you fancied; and that it isn't the easiest thing in the world helping fools who can't . . . help themselves. There are all those Tidewater idiots . . . made me read about . . . you'll have to attend to them, Mercer . . . old woman in the queer clothes . . . chorus girl . . . those old ladies who had one egg between them for breakfast . . . you'll see to them all?"

"Yes," said Mercer, looking down on the shrunken features with a look of pain and bewilderment. "Yes, suh, I'll do my best."

"And—we're even?"

"I reckon I am obliged to call it so, suh," returned Mercer with a long, gasping sigh, "but—my Lord! you'd better have let *me* go!"

"Very likely," said Keatcham dryly, "the city needs me. Well, Winter, you must look after that. I've been thinking why a man throws his life away as I did; he *has* to, unless he's a poltroon. He can't count whether he's more useful

than the one he saves . . . he has simply *got* to save him . . . you were a good deal right, Winter, about not doing the evil thing to get the good. No, it's a bad time for me to be taken; but it's an honorable discharge. . . . Helen will be glad . . . you know I'm not a pig, Winter . . . do what I tried to do . . . where's my kind nurse?" Janet was trying by almost imperceptible movements to edge a pillow under his shoulders; he was past turning his head, but his eyes moved toward her. "I've left you . . . a wedding gift . . . if I lived . . . given to you; but made it safe, anyhow. Mercer?"

His voice had grown so feeble and came in such gasps from his torn and laboring chest that Mercer bent close to his lips to hear the struggling sentences. "Mercer," he whispered, "I want . . . just . . . to tell you . . . *you didn't convert me!*"

Thus, having made amends to his own will, having also, let us humbly hope, made amends to that greater and wiser Will which is of more merciful and wider vision that our weakness can comprehend, Edwin Keatcham very willingly closed his eyes on earth.

CHAPTER XIX

EXTRACT FROM A LETTER

From Mrs. Rebecca Winter to Mrs. John S. G. Winslow,

Fairport, Iowa.

* * * * * * * *

And it was delightful to discover that you were so distressed about me. I must be getting a trifle maudlin in my old age, for I have had a lump in my throat every time I have thought of Johnny and you actually starting out to find me; I am thankful my telegram (Please, Peggy, do not call it a *wire* again—to me! I loathe these verbal indolences) reached you at Omaha in time to stop you.

Really, we have not had hardships. Thanks to Israel Putnam Arnold! I have a very admiring gratitude for that man! In these days of degeneracy he builded a stanch enduring house. With union labor, too! I don't see how he contrived to do it. Generally, when they build houses here,

they scamp the underpinning and weaken the joists and paint over the dirt instead of washing it off; and otherwise deserve to be killed. The unfortunate man opposite had just that kind of house, which tumbled down and burned up, at once; but, alas! it killed some of the people in it, not the guilty masons and carpenters.

Our chimneys have been inspected and we are now legally as well as actually sound; but we did not suffer. We cooked out on the sidewalk, and supplemented our cooking with young Tracy's stove.

I told you of Janet's engagement. Confidentially, my dear Peggy, I am a bit responsible. They met by chance on the train; and I assure you, although chance might have parted us, I did not let it. I clung to Nephew Bertie. I'm sure he wondered why. I knew better than to let him suspect. But a success you can't share is like a rose without a smell. So I confess to you, *I* have made this match. But when you see Millicent she will tell you that *she* helped things along. She has abused Janet like a pickpocket; but now, since she has discovered Janet didn't draw the Daughters' caricature of her, she regards her as one of the gems of the century.

We are recovering from the terrible events of which we wrote. It is certainly a relief that Atkins is killed. He was one of the two scoundrels who sneaked into the *patio* and put the bombs into the automobile. Bertie shot him. You have no doubt heard all about Mr. Keatcham's death. He was killed by the man whose wickedness he had unconsciously fostered. He did not know it, but I make no doubt his swollen fortune and the unscrupulous daring of its acquiring had a great influence in corrupting his secretary.

And his corruption was his master's undoing. I must say I sympathize with young Tracy, who said last night: "I feel as if I had been put to soak in crime! That bomb was the limit. In future, me for common or garden virtue; it may be tame but I prefer tameness to delirium tremens!"

I used to think that I should like to match my wits against a first-class criminal intellect; God forgive me for the wish! I have been matching wits for the last month; and never putting on my shoes without looking in them for a baby bomblet or feeling a twinge of indigestion without darkly suspecting the cook—who is really the best creature in the world, sent Mr. Arnold by a good Chinese friend of mine. (I had a chance to do a

good turn to my friend, by the way, during the earthquake and thus repay some of his to me.)

Archie is well and cheerful. Isn't it like the Winter temperament to lose its melancholy in such horrors as we have seen? Archie is distinctly happier since he came to California. As for Janet and Rupert—oh, well, my dear, you and Johnny *know!* The house has been full of people, and we have had several friends of our own for a day or two. I got a recipe for a delicious tea-cake from Mrs. Wigglesworth of Boston. She didn't save anything but her furs and her kimono and a bridge set, besides what she had on; she packed her trunk with great care and nobody would take it down-stairs. Of course she saved her bag of jewels, which reminds me that poor Mr. Keatcham left Janet some pearls—that is, the money for them. He was very much attached to her.

We buried him on the crest of the hill; later, when more settled times shall come, he may take another and last journey to that huge mausoleum where his wife and mother are buried. Poor things! it is to be hoped they had no taste living or else that they can't see now how hideous and flamboyant is their last costly resting place. But

if Keatcham hadn't a taste for the fine arts he had compensating qualities. I shall never forget the night of his burial. It was a "wonderful great night of stars," as Stevenson says. A poor little tired-out clergyman, in a bedraggled surplice, who had been reading prayers over people for the last ten hours and was fit to drop, hurried through the service; and the town the dead man loved was flaming miles beyond miles. About the grave was none of his blood, none of his ancient friends, but the men I believe he would have chosen—men who had fought him and then had fought for him faithfully. They were haggard and spent with fighting the fire; and they went from his burial back to days and nights of desperate effort. He had fought and lost and yet did not lose at the last, but won, snatching victory out of defeat as he was wont to do all his life. The heavy burdens which have dropped from his shoulders these others whom he chose will carry, maybe more humbly, perhaps not so capably, but quite as courageously. And it is singular how his influence persists, how it touches Kito and Haley, as well as the others.

"Shure," said honest Haley (whose wit you are likely to sample in the near future, for he has

elected to be the Rupert Winters' chauffeur; they don't know it yet, but they *will* when it is time.) ; "shure," says he, "whin thot man so mashed up there ye cudn't move him for fear ye'd lose the main parrt of him, whin *he* was thinkin' of the town and nothin' else, I hadn't the heart to be complainin' for the loss of a few teeth and a few limps about me! An' I fair wu'ked like the divil. So did Kito, who's a dacint Jap gintleman and no haythin at all."

Poor Keatcham, he had no childhood and his wife died too soon to revive the fragrance of his youth; but I can't help but think he had a reticent, awkward, shy sort of heart somewhere about him. Well, he was what Millicent would call "a compelling personality." I use plain language and I call him a great man. He won the lion's share because he was the lion. And yet, poor Lion, his share was a lonely life and a tragic death.

THE END